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Part 2
International Education Issues

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Between "Scylla and Charybdis"? Trusteeship, Africa-China Relations, and Education Policy and Practice

Abstract

Sub-Saharan African societies had contacts with China that stretch back to the early days of the Silk Road where the two regions facilitated trade relations and exchanged technology and ideas. Beginning in the 1950s China formalized relations with SSA based on South-South cooperation. At the end of the Cold War, China intensified its relations with SSA within the frameworks of "One Belt one Road" in Africa and the Forum for China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). The China-Africa relations have scored benefits in the areas of promoting infrastructural development, strong investments in SSA, trade links between the two regions, less expensive technical assistance for nations in SSA, cultural exchanges, and student scholarships. Nonetheless, the relations raise complicated issues around trade where China is flooding markets in SSA with inferior goods, acquisition of resources, Chinese mining companies causing environmental destruction in many countries in SSA, and the Chinese government's debt trapping of many sub-Saharan African nations. Many suspect that China is surreptitiously forging a relationship with SSA that may help it assert its "trusteeship" over sub-Saharan Africa's political, economic, and development processes. The paper is developed within these broader contexts to examine the paradoxes and contradictions of the China-sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) relations and their potential impacts on education policy and practice in the region. The paper focuses on SSA, a region that constitutes forty-eight of the fifty-four countries of the African continent. This sociohistorical paper is part of my ongoing study to examine the impacts of external forces' economic and political relations on education policy and practice in the SSA and the potential of the relations to destabilize the epistemological processes of sub-Saharan African societies.

Keywords: education policy, sub-Saharan Africa, China-Africa relations, education and development, human capital, human rights and education

Introduction

Sub-Saharan African nations and China have forged relations that demonstrate both optimism and pessimism. The economic ties between the two regions have grown by leaps and bounds. However, the relationship is defined by lending, borrowing, and debt trapping. This paper examines the paradoxes and contradictions of China-sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) relations and their potential impacts on education policy and practice in SSA. I situate my discussion within the "trusteeship" framework and conceptualize trusteeship as a colonial intervention strategy, power relations, and politico-economic practices that draw from the doctrine that "men could be perfected by the deliberate intervention of their fellow men" (Bain, 2003, p. 181). I organize the paper in three parts: an examination of the paradoxes in China-SSA relations; the contradictions of China-SSA relations; and a discussion of the potential impacts of China-SSA relations on education policy and practice. The paper is a sociohistorical analysis that uses the review of literature, analysis of online documents, newspaper publications from SSA, anecdotal reports, and lore as the methodological approach. The paper is part of my ongoing study to examine the impacts of external forces' economic and political relations on education policy and practice in SSA, and the potential of the relations to destabilize the epistemological processes of sub-Saharan African societies (Quist, 2003; Stambach & Cappy, 2012).

China's earlier relations with Africa, which date to some millennia past, were based on trade and exchange of goods and little (if any) diplomatic and geopolitical processes (Farooq et al., 2019; Hevron & Crowley, 2019). However, in the 1950s, China forged strong relations and robust engagements with SSA based on China's "South-South cooperation". China expressed its desire to position itself as a significant role player in global geopolitics after the end of the Cold War. African nations also expressed their desire to explore an alternative to Western imperialistic relationships and therefore saw the "China model" as an alternative to American neoliberalism (Asante, 2018; Basu & Janiec, 2021; Farooq et al., 2019). In 2006 China outlined the four pillars that encompass its relationship with African countries: peaceful coexistence; mutual economic benefits; tightening cooperation in the international area; and support for African countries' development (Plotka, 2020).

Paradoxical relationship

China-Africa relations are full of paradoxes in the areas of economic and political benefits. In the 1950s China began to offer modest foreign aid, promote little trade, and provide little to no direct investment in Africa (Shinn & Eisenman, 2012). In the 1960s, China offered soft loans to newly independent nations with no conditions. In the 1970s, China began to embark on infrastructural development in SSA to demonstrate its interests in the region (Debrah & Asante, 2019; Farooq et al., 2019). China also registered its presence in the region with a focus on high level visits, cultural exchanges, student scholarships, and less expensive technical assistance. However, beginning in 1990, China began to register its strong presence in Africa, which was motivated by its growing need for raw materials. Therefore, China increased its trade, aid, and direct investment with SSA as a bargaining chip to assert its benign trusteeship and control in SSA. Gadzala (2015) and Shinn and Eisenman (2012) note that as China's state-directed assistance and commerce grew, so did the presence of state-run firms in African countries, building bridges, dams, roads, and railroads. In the 1990s, China bankrolled over 800 projects throughout Africa to offer alternatives to North-South trade and investment patterns that dominated global trade since the colonial era (Asante, 2018). China systematically increased its financial support for Africa from 2000 to 2020 peaking at around 12% of Africa's private and public external debt. Asante (2018) points out that the trade relations between China and Africa have expanded the middle class in both regions, these aid initiatives emerged with China using similar props of the colonial and imperial powers to assert some form of trusteeship in the sub-Saharan African nations.

China is interested in investing in Africa for a couple of reasons: to gain access to Africa's resources; gain access to (and possibly monopolize) the African market; secure investment opportunities; forge political allies with Africans to consolidate symbolic "empires"; and to consolidate the relationship with Africa as part of China's trans-imperial project on the African continent. As it pertains to SSA, China views its "going global" as including promoting trade and investment (either directly or through infrastructural development), increasing demand for raw materials, and the ability to produce affordable consumer goods and capital equipment in the region (Asante, 2018; Shinn & Eisenmann, 2012).

The 2022 Economist Business Report estimates that about 10,000 Chinese firms are active in Africa. Many of these 10,000 Chinese firms in Africa have profit margins of between 20 percent and 90 percent. Annual flows of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) from China rose from just $75 million in 2003 to $4.2 billion in 2020. The value of trade between China and Africa has risen from $10 billion in 2000 to a record $254 billion in 2021—more than four times that between America and Africa. Chinese firms lobby to win around half of all African construction contracts that are tendered to foreign firms (see The Economist, 2022). The Economist argues that it is not because Chinese firms are competitive that they are successful in winning contracts. It is because, for the most part, they have mastered how to play the game. Many of these Chinese firms are corrupt and use corrupt means to "grease the palms" of African politicians.

This economic progress notwithstanding, some of the Chinese investments in SSA are only great in the short term but pose economic challenges in the region in the long term. China's trade relationship through competitive markets in SSA is killing local manufacturing companies. Research shows that Chinese companies are undermining locally manufactured goods (Atobrah et al., 2021; Nnanna, 2015; The Economist, 2022). The challenge for sub-Saharan African governments is how to create a balance where Chinese companies build competitive markets that do not also kill local manufacturing companies. Many Africans view the arrival of Chinese firms as another episode in the history of external trusteeship, organized infantilism of the masses, and internalized oppression of African corrupt politicians. There are accounts of Chinese infrastructural investments and mining activities creating serious environmental degradations in rural communities in Zimbabwe, Ghana, Zambia, and Botswana and becoming a detriment to the livelihoods of many local communities (Beyongo, 2017; Hevron & Crowley, 2019; The Economist, 2022). Tighter regulation of pollution in China is one of the reasons why some Chinese firms move to Africa.

China poses as a reliable lender that provides the opportunity for governments in SSA to borrow. However, its unbridled lending to SSA governments has become a debt trap for African societies so China can advance its geopolitical interests. After baiting sub-Saharan African nations to do more borrowing, China is now applying similar conditionalities used by Western imperial forces, to retrieve the debts owed by sub-Saharan African nations.

China's agenda in SSA is to push out other competitors and monopolize the region's market and investment. It works within its "go global" framework and overseas investment strategies through Chinese firms in SSA to phase out all competitors (The Economist, 2022). The goal is to counter neoliberalism and free market ideologies of the Global North. Chinese firms have become scavengers and doling out huge sums of money to buy out foreign companies that are already operating in SSA with the goal to monopolize the markets and once they purchase these companies, implementing practices that are detrimental to local Africans that work in the companies. Local communities experience the brunt of Chinese activities and think Chinese firms are more ruthless than Western ones (The Economist, 2022).

Sub-Saharan African nations cannot count on China on issues of transparency as Chinese investments have exacerbated corrupt practices in the region. Chinese investors in SSA are notorious lobbyists who incentivize African leaders and politicians by dolling out bribes to secure tender for infrastructural projects. The activities of Chinese firms have become another opportunity for African elites and political operatives to collude with extractive firms to exploit their nations' immense resources. Reports of Chinese firms reaching only the elite echelons of African societies abound (The Economist, 2022).

Politically, China supported colonized African nations and liberation movements striving to attain political independence. At the 1955 Bandung Conference in Indonesia, representatives of most African nations and independent Asian countries resolved to promote economic and cultural cooperation among themselves and reduce dependence on the West (Rugumamu, 2014). China took advantage of the Cold War and the nonaligned position taken by the post-independent African states, to court them. Between the 1960s and 1980s China strengthened its partnership with African nations. The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) witnessed rapid development of global market economy, partial decline of the United States, and shifts in the bipolar power struggle between the East and West to a more multi-polarity mode where so many powers emerged in the global governance scene.

As a one-party state, China has tried to navigate the complexities of Africa's multiparty democracies through the development of exchanges with African political parties, parliamentary delegations, cadres, and cultural and educational groups and shifted its political focus from supporting wars of national liberation in the 1950s to post-1978 economic reform efforts (Shinn & Eisenman, 2012). From 2000, a wide range of China-Africa political and economic interaction has occurred under the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) framework. China has made the political calculation to deal with the different spectrums of political ideologies in Africa—monarchies, conservative governments, right-leaning independent African countries, and various types of African governments to advance China's interests (Shinn & Eisenman, 2012). Thus, politically, China is everything to every government in SSA and insists on political neutrality to ensure its cordial relations with any government in control of the levers of state power in SSA. This political calculation is unpredictable and presents a paradox for governments in SSA. African nations at least know their dealings with the colonial West because they have been dealing with them for many years and at least in recent years

Western nations have genuinely embodied humanitarian values and human rights in their relationship. Many express the sentiment that "the devil you know is better than the devil you don't know". China's noninterference approach and its apathy toward human rights means that it can continue to provide support for governments that disenfranchise a section of its citizens and trample on the human rights of specific groups (Plotka, 2020; Hevron & Crowley, 2019).

Contradictory relationship

China has embarked on massive investments in infrastructural development in SSA totaling over $200 billion to boost the economic fortunes of the region and to present an alternative to the formerly colonial and imperial powers of the Global North. On top of China's infrastructural development is the 2700 km East African railway line that includes Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and South Sudan railway line that is currently in construction in phases. Another major project is the 1315 km Kano-Lagos railway line in Nigeria, and the 1302 km Bengue railway line in Angola, which will bring to a total of 4000 km railway in Angola constructed by China (Hevron & Crowley, 2019; Farooq et al., 2019). These massive investments in infrastructural development are not so much because China wants the region to develop. They are part of China's "One Belt, One Road in Africa" policy to provide financial gains, access to the raw material needed, and open African markets for China to dump its goods (see Atobrah et al., 2021; Farooq et al., 2019). China's agenda for its "One Belt, One Road in Africa", is to connect China to Africa to the Suez Canal for easy passage of raw materials from the northern parts of Africa and position itself for global dominance and the geopolitics of the horn of Africa (Farooq et al., 2019).

China's contributions to SSA include a cautionary tale about its surreptitious economic "imperialism" that it is going to unleash on sub-Saharan African nations from this debt trapping (Asante, 2018; Basu & Janiec, 2021; Gadzala, 2015; Obeng-Odoom, 2024). Data from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank show that about 12 percent of the debt burden on Africa is owed to Chinese lenders and much of the debt is owed by sub-Saharan African nations. As of the close of 2021, China was Africa's biggest bilateral lender, holding over $73 billion of Africa's debt and around $9 billion in private debt. This massive borrowing by sub-Saharan African governments from China and other nations has put them in debt distress or at high risk of debt distress. Africa's massive debt to China and the ensuing negotiations, has put China in a position where it could employ the same old "trusteeship" interventions that the United States and its European allies and entities employ to exploit sub-Saharan African nations of their resources.

Potential impacts of Africa-China relations on education policy and practice

Students of history and economics know that China-Africa relations come with some potential implications for education policy and practice. First, is the reality that external powers that encroached on African territories enforced their education, cultural values, and ways of socializing their younger generations in African societies, which restructured the social arrangements in African societies and destabilized their identities (Blakemore, 1975; Rodney, 1988). The approaches, processes, and props being used by

Chinese entities in SSA are similar in form to those used by the external forces that preceded them. Muslim Arabs engaged with African societies to promote trade relations and over time acquired African territories, asserted their trusteeship, and established Koranic schools to indoctrinate and Islamize the younger generation of Africans. Similarly, Europeans initially came to trade and over time, embarked on explorations, sent European Christian missionaries to African territories, colonized African territories, and then used Western forms of Christian and colonial education to "proselytize" the younger generations of Africans to embrace European/Christian values. After World War I, American philanthropic entities scouted SSA to promote "capitalist doctrine" in the form of human resource development and over time acquired "symbolic territories" and pushed "adapted" and "industrial" education on Black Africans in SSA. This philanthropic support for education became a blueprint for post-World War II Western nations to use their Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) to steer the direction of education policy and practice in SSA.

Secondly, external forces created "crisis" as an industry in the development discourse and used "crisis" in SSA as a rationale and justification to intervene in Africa's development agenda (Barrios, 2017; Mfum-Mensah, 2020). Crisis, whether real or perceived, usually calls for reforms. We witnessed this in the way Western entities focused on the education sector in SSA and implemented universal primary education campaigns in the 1940s into the 1980s culminating in the 1990 Jomtien World Education Conference and subsequent planetary initiatives, which all focused on education in SSA. China's debt trapping and Africa's debt distress is a crisis that China could exploit and use as a rationale to extend its trusteeship in all sectors of SSA's socioeconomic processes including human capital and human resource development.

Thirdly, given that China's numerous infrastructural activities and investments are contributing to the environmental degradation in SSA, China could incorporate conditionality on education programs supported through Chinese ODA, to ensure that such programs (if they incorporate environmental stewardship and sustainability) do not undermine China's interests.

Finally, we should point out that neoliberal agendas and free market ideologies introduced by Western allies in sub-Sahara Africa's education sector in the 1980s focused on privatization, choice, decentralization, and other democratic principles in school organization and classroom practices. China can broaden its monopolistic approach, lack of transparency, and lack of human rights in the education sector by pushing policy makers to dismantle or undermine those neoliberal ideologies and practices, incorporate authoritarian practices, and censure human rights in school organizations and classroom processes.

Conclusion

China's South-South cooperation with SSA, which began in the 1950s, is surreptitiously treading toward trusteeship in SSA. China is driven by its ambition to acquire a physical and symbolical empire in SSA to exploit new sources of (raw) material, consolidate trade, commerce, and mercantilism, and accumulate wealth at the expense of targeted African societies. The relationship between China and sub-Saharan African nations has had mutual benefits to the two regions. As China continues to become a formidable competitor on the global geopolitics, it will continue to do everything within its "go global" agenda to win sub-Saharan African nations to maintain the strong relationship it has already forged. China’s relations with SSA are strategic with economic, political, and cultural ramifications.

In the education sector, China could use its debt trapping as a rationale to intervene in how the region prepares its human capital. Not only that, but it could also use the opportunity of the relationship to impose its cultural values, in the education systems in SSA. As part of its cultural transfer, China can strengthen Chinese studies programs and the learning of Chinse as in SSA by funding programs of such nature. Already, many Africans students have turned toward China for higher education.

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