

(RE)BRANDING A 'CHINA ALTERNATIVE' IN AFRICA'S DEVELOPMENT SCENE

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During summer 2014, I spent five weeks in China doing dissertation fieldwork. During the time spent in Beijing and in Jinhua (Zhejiang province), I have conducted semi-structured interviews with civil servants, government officials, academic specialists, think-tank experts on Sino-African relations, and journalists who work in Chinese news anchors in Africa. In addition to this series of interviews, I engaged as a participant-observer in a workshop comparing OECD/DAC group and Chinese aid agencies and their respective project evaluation mechanisms. The workshop invited representatives from Japan's International Cooperation Agency (JICA), the *Agence Française de Développement* (AFD), and USAID to showcase their respective evaluation mechanisms and demonstrate with a case study. Then, there were three government representatives from Uganda, Cameroon, and Sri Lanka who each gave presentations evaluating the evaluation mechanisms of JICA, AFD, and USAID and highlighting their strengths and weaknesses. The final part of the workshop opened the floor to Chinese government representatives to (re) present the Chinese alternative in carrying developmental project evaluation in Africa mostly. Representatives from the Chinese Ministry of Commerce as well China Ex-Im Bank made a case for the advantage of China's position as a later comer to the 'donor' role and stressed that China's experience as a recipient of foreign aid gives it the advantage of understanding the

recipients' challenges and aspirations. The main take away for me from this experience attending the workshop was to see how the Chinese official rhetoric frames its relationship to the rest of the Global South as a provider of a promising alternative to existing traditional powers. In this regard, China can identify both as an emerging powerful donor as well as a historically long time recipient of foreign aid and can, thus, put both hats on as a way to illustrate the pragmatism of its foreign policy.

In addition to this, I also attended a high-level official China-Africa Media Forum which brought government representatives from 48 African countries to Beijing in order to discuss digital media collaboration. The experience was very engaging for me since I got to observe the interactions between Chinese officials and their African counterparts and listen to their speeches. The main take away for me from this experience was to see how African delegates were also able and willing to be pragmatic in their relations with China—emphasizing its value added in the continent's development in their discourses—without excluding their chances to strike deals with American investors during the US-Africa Summit held in August.

This fieldwork research feeds into my dissertation project investigating China-Africa relations from an international relations perspective. More specifically, I investigate what the nature of China's power in Africa is. Since China does not have a single military base in Africa nor does it conduct extensive military drills like traditional powers (such as, for example, the US, the UK, and France), in what other ways does China's power take shape in Africa? I argue that it is not sufficient to examine Chinese influence and deployment of power in Africa from a material capabilities approach as seen in investment projects, construction works, resource extraction deals, and armament

sales. Without neglecting the roles that these aspects of power play, I argue that it is necessary to investigate a more subtle face of power that lies within the practices that promote Chinese know-how and (re) brand a Chinese path to development. I therefore take practices such as training African military, agricultural technologies from Chinese rural areas, as well as producing African scholars sponsored by the Chinese government, as government practices that work by ways of producing and normalizing a China alternative.



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