

Editorial: Africa and China: Cooperation, interactions and research

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It is convenient to identify the establishment of the Forum on China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000 as the symbolic starting-point of a new phase of China's engagement with Africa. This intensified engagement is driven by the imperatives of China's current mode of accumulation which demands raw materials for its rapid industrialisation, and export markets for its manufactured products. It reflects China's increased integration into the global capitalist economy since its adoption of the "Go out policy" in 1999. Thus in analysing the changing relationship between Africa and China, much attention must be given to the economic issues of trade and investment, and the role China has played in the commodities boom that has fuelled a period of strong economic growth on the continent. But while these economic realities are the basis of China's current involvement with Africa, there are many other ways that China interacts with the continent, diplomatically, socially and culturally. Hence a comprehensive academic analysis of the modalities and impact of China's engagement with Africa must encompass a complexity of issues at different levels of China's intercourse with Africa. This requires both the concepts that can capture the dialectic of global trends and local responses, and the tools of multi-disciplinary perspectives.

This is evident in the expanding field of scholarship on the relationship between Africa and China that has grown in parallel to the new realities of engagement. A dozen books on the topic have appeared in recent years, as well as numerous journal articles and technical reports. Scholars at the University of Botswana have participated in this development by establishing the Africa-China Research Group (ACRG), a multi-disciplinary network that was formalised in 2013. The ACRG was established at the University alongside the Department of Chinese Studies and the Confucius Institute in a distinctive institutional architecture designed to engage academically with China (Youngman, 2014). In 2014, the ACRG organised a conference on the theme *Africa-China: Advancing Mutual Understanding through Multi-Disciplinary Research*, to which were invited University of Botswana academics and scholars from strategic partner institutions, namely the Centre for Chinese Studies, Stellenbosch University, the Centre for African Studies, Shanghai Normal University, and the Institute for African Studies, Zhejiang Normal University. The majority of the articles in this Special Edition of *PULA: Botswana Journal of African Studies* were initially presented at that conference. Taken together, they embody an important principle of the ACRG, namely the promotion of more publications by African and Chinese scholars to counter the fact that knowledge production and dissemination in

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the field of Africa-China relations is dominated by Western scholars who have their own interests, ideologies and positionalities. Collected here is the work of ten African scholars and five Chinese scholars. For those articles that focus on Botswana, we can rightly say that they represent the “first generation” of research on Botswana and China as very little was published before 2013 (notable exceptions being a chapter by Bolaane (2007) on the history of China’s relations with Botswana, and another by Kalusopa (2009) on Chinese investments). The importance of these country-specific studies is that they can contribute to a more differentiated understanding of the relationship between China and Africa, as the latter comprises fifty five countries with different issues and interests.

The articles included in this Special Edition encompass a number of different disciplines (including economics, sociology, media studies, linguistics, design and social policy) and a variety of topics in a way that exemplifies the emerging field of Africa-China scholarship. We have ordered and grouped the articles under the title *Africa and China: Cooperation, interactions and research*.

The first two articles consider aspects of China’s economic cooperation with Africa. The article by Zhang provides an overview of this cooperation, but focuses particularly on a new aspect of China’s foreign policy, namely its desire to cooperate with multilateral African organizations such as the African Union and sub-regional groupings such as the East African Community. Its goal is to support the African Union’s priority of the economic integration of Africa. Zhang concludes with an assessment of the future prospects of China’s regional economic cooperation with Africa. The article by Morapedi and Manatsha is policy-oriented; it analyses China’s cooperation with Africa in agriculture and for Botswana’s need to seek assistance from China in the area of agriculture in order to improve the sector’s contribution to GDP which has steadily declined to around 3%. It provides a good example of the potential for academic analysis to influence the policy process and enable a proactive national approach to seeking China’s economic assistance. Economic cooperation is part of state-to-state relations, and is an important component of China’s diplomatic relations with individual African countries and with the continent’s multi-lateral organizations. Analyses of the nature and impacts of China’s development assistance constitute an important topic within the Africa-China research agenda.

An even more important dimension of the multi-level character of Africa-China research is the study of interactions at the community and interpersonal level. The next two articles explore the social interactions that result from the proliferation of Chinese-owned small businesses in Botswana. Firstly, Zi documents a micro-sociological empirical study of “the China shop phenomenon” in Gaborone based on a qualitative research design using in-depth interviews and participant observation, and obtaining the views of both the Chinese merchants and their local employees. The article analyses the tensions and conflicts in the interpersonal relations between Chinese merchants and local shop assistants and customers. Of particular interest is the analysis of the views of the merchants themselves on their business challenges and

strategies because only a few studies in English have documented the perspectives and experiences of Chinese small business-owners in Africa (see, for example, McNamee, 2012, and Giese, 2013). Secondly, Mathangwane presents an exploratory study of a particular site of interaction – the Oriental Plaza in Francistown – and considers the issues of cultural conflict and segregation, taking into account the history of Chinatowns in the West. These two articles illustrate how the increased international mobility of Chinese small-scale entrepreneurs in the era of globalization leads to a myriad of issues related to the daily dealings between the Chinese and their African hosts. The articles contribute to a growing literature on this specific issue across the continent and demonstrate how the interactions around small retail shops and petty trade are perhaps the most intensive inter-cultural consequences of China’s presence in Africa.

The realities of China’s pervasive presence on the continent at the state, community and personal levels are reflected in multiple representations of China in the media. Moahi’s analysis of Botswana-China relations in the Botswana print media adds to the expanding number of studies which explore African reactions to China’s new engagement as portrayed in local newspaper articles. Moahi undertook a content analysis of four newspapers in the period 2004 to 2014 using a media framing model that differentiated a number of positive and negative viewpoints, such as China as “development partner” and China as “catalyst for crime and impropriety”. The analysis considered different topics and trends over time. It shows that multiple images of China are portrayed in the newspapers, and Moahi reaches a similar conclusion to other studies that there are mixed perceptions regarding Africa China relations, depending on the issue covered and the date of publication. It is evident that there is need for further research that not only analyses newspaper content but also investigates the extent to which articles in African newspapers about China and the Chinese reflect public opinion and to what extent they shape public attitudes and perceptions.

The next two articles examine a particular mode of interaction between Africans and China, namely the learning of Mandarin. Language learning constitutes a very singular way of engaging with Chinese culture, and it is clearly seen by African learners as an opportunity to acquire a valuable skill. The articles consider the needs and experiences of African learners of Mandarin based in environments that are “geographically and linguistically distant from China” (Wang and Lemmer, this volume). These papers are an important contribution to the understanding of issues facing African learners of the Chinese language. Fang and Tan conducted a quantitative survey of Mandarin learners at the University of Botswana Confucius Institute (CIUB). The study identified the demographic characteristics of the learners which range from university students to members of various sections of the public who are enrolled in levels 1 to 9 of the language programme offered on a part-time basis at the CIUB. The study also identified the learners’ needs in terms of the purpose, goals, interest and motivation for learning Mandarin – which range from wanting to communicate with the Chinese friends in Botswana, an interest in the Chinese language and culture, doing business in China and Botswana, and studying in China. The article provides useful information on the challenges facing these

learners, which range from how the language is taught, specific areas of difficulty in the language itself, and finally the lack of opportunity to practice what they have learnt. Similarly, Wang and Lemmer consider the experience of learners of Chinese at four South African universities. Unlike Fang and Tan, their study considered learners enrolled in degree programmes where the language may be taken as an elective, a minor or a major subject. It emerged that the experience of these learners was akin to being on a “lonely journey” due to learning a language in a setting where it is not one of the languages of wider communication. The study shows that there are multiple dimensions to this experience, including challenges with class scheduling and tutor support, issues of communication inside and outside class, emotional aspects of language learning, and specific difficulties of acquiring Chinese as a foreign language. They concluded that the isolation and loneliness comes from the learning context, and this provides insights that might be useful for improving the learning experience, retaining learners and improving outcomes. The suggested solutions include creating what are termed “artificial or virtual immersion conditions”, and other creative ways of bringing African learners into contact with native Mandarin speakers. The analysis in the two articles may be helpful in making the teaching of Mandarin in Africa more effective, which is a valuable contribution as improved competence in Mandarin among Africans can help to reduce the linguistic barriers that often lead to misunderstanding and conflict in communities, workplaces and businesses.

The Chinese are known and admired for promoting their cultural knowledge and products worldwide by infusing their cultural knowledge into services and products that they produce and market. On the other hand, Botswana recognizes the value of its cultural knowledge and heritage in diversifying the economy and acknowledges the need to promote the use of such knowledge to create economic value. The article by Setlhatlhanyo, Mwendapole, and Mapfaira explores how the use of cultural heritage knowledge in the design of goods, products and services can lead to the promotion of a country’s culture and can become a competitive design tool. In particular, they explore design-related cultural models from the Chinese-speaking world and select one out of two models that they have analysed to be used in the design of a local product. The article then describes the process used in designing this product (*Knees of the Tortoise* project) using a design model based on the culture of the Tao people of Taiwan (Hsu et al, 2011). The process of arriving at the type of product (place mats) to be produced (through a focus group discussion), the choice of specific design pattern (*Knees of the Tortoise*) from patterns found in 24 woven baskets (through a Facebook survey), and the actual design of place mats are described. The authors conclude that indeed culture based designs can lead to the design of products that resonate with local populations as well as provide a vehicle for promoting a country’s cultural heritage, and more importantly, the protection of indigenous knowledge. They also demonstrate the link that can be forged between cultural knowledge, modern lifestyles, and the use of technology to facilitate the process of engagement in cooperation

The final two articles are forward-looking in nature and represent proposals for future research (Sinkamba) and for the establishment of a Centre for Africa-China Research (Mazonde).

Sinkamba's literature review addresses the issue of alcohol abuse in Botswana and China, and considers the interventions that each government has put in place. The conclusion is that neither country has very effective interventions. Sinkamba suggests collaborative comparative research on alcohol abuse and its impact on health, the economy and the family. The assumption is that this type of targeted research could inform public health policy and other interventions. The value of having this article in this issue is that it puts forward ideas for future collaboration and, hopefully, will generate interest for implementing the study. The main importance of the article is that it raises the issue of comparative research between African countries and China. So far there appear to have been few cross-national comparative studies of this nature, perhaps because of the conceptual, methodological and practical challenges involved. Yet this seems to be an area of great potential both for scholarly analysis and for mutual learning.

Mazonde's article makes the case for the establishment of a research centre at the University of Botswana, building on the momentum established by the University of Botswana's Africa-China Research Group (ACRG), which was set up in 2013 to encourage and promote the study of Africa-China relations. The article acknowledges that the changes in the socio-economic and political position of China in the global landscape demonstrate the importance of China to Botswana and other African countries. This has implications for how Botswana and the rest of Africa respond to making the growing relationship between themselves and China a mutually beneficial one. It thus creates imperatives for rigorous academic research that informs policies and strategies to guide Africa's interactions with China. Chinese researchers and institutions are also seen as possible collaborative partners in such a centre. In making the case for the centre at the University of Botswana, Mazonde posits that the success of such a centre would depend on its ability to attract collaborative research activities. Such research collaboration is critical for researchers in Africa where securing research funding can be a challenge. Mazonde provides guidance on what to look for when considering research collaboration, and suggests that one needs to take into account, among other factors, the research objectives of the collaborative partner(s), using institutional policies and strategies to guide the decision. He makes the point that for the proposed research centre to be successful, it must have a regional and global dimension, stakeholder diversity, and support from institutional leadership. This would enable it to attract interest, funding and visibility. Although the article focuses on a particular university, the case study provides generalizable ideas on how to build the capacity to undertake relevant research on the multiple dimensions of the Africa-China relationship. The current debate on the nature and extent of "African agency" in its relations with China (see, for example, Mohan and Lampert, 2012) suggests that this capacity is essential if African states, businesses, workers and communities are to engage with China on a more equal footing.

Finally, we would like to thank colleagues who peer-reviewed the articles here, often at short notice. They come from the following institutions: Johns Hopkins University, Georgetown University, State University of New York at Buffalo, Stellenbosch University, University of Botswana, University of Cape Town, University of South Africa, Witwatersrand University,

University of Zambia and Yale University. They are part of the rapidly growing network of scholars engaged with Africa-China issues and their contribution is much appreciated. We hope that the articles collected here will meet their expectations and those of our readers.

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