



**CHINESE PROXY POLITICAL WARFARE IN AFRICA:
CHINA'S STRATEGY TO CULTIVATE AND CO-OPT CURRENT AND FUTURE AFRICAN ELITES**

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Abstract

Africa, since the turn of the millennium, has seen an unprecedented increase in Chinese influence across the continent. And while China's infrastructure and resource extraction projects are well documented, perhaps one of the most underexplored aspects of the Africa-China relationship has been Beijing's cultivation of current and future African political, economic, and social elites. Beijing has engineered a systematic and complex infrastructure of geographically targeted aid, political training workshops, government exchanges, student scholarships, governance schools, mentorships, glamorous conferences, and high-profile state visits to co-opt African elites and establish patronage networks to influence and support the Chinese agenda in Africa. After a brief overview of the historical relationship, this paper will turn to an analysis of the current situation, evaluate its efficacy thus far, address potential criticism, make predictions about the future, and finally suggest policy recommendations.

Introduction

From 2017 to 2018, I was a student at a high school in the northeast corner of Beijing living and studying together with other foreign students. Our lingua franca was Mandarin, and on our dorm floor, our friends included Mongols, Uzbeks, Kazakhs, North Koreans, Thais, and Brazilian nationals just to name a few but no group stood out more in this environment than the very few Africans. There were only three of them, and all of them were the sons of Angolan government-affiliated oil tycoons. They'd been sent by their fathers to study in China and become fluent in Mandarin so that one day, these scions can seamlessly work with Chinese businessmen and investors when they take over their fathers' oil empires. They explained that Beijing was a no-brainer location given that this is where political connections are made, and indeed on weekends, they accompanied their fathers around Beijing learning and observing how business got done in the Chinese capital. Even if they were just 16 or 17 years old, they were also translators and making early connections. They were extremely laid back boys who I and fellow Americans ended up spending a great deal of time together chatting about what their lives will look like in the not-so-distant future. Two had been in Beijing since their childhoods going through the public school system and now were in the midst of preparing for the *gaokao*, the brutal nationwide test hoping to make it into Tsinghua, China's most prestigious university. Later, they admitted that the test was just a formality though, and a spot was already reserved for them in the Class of 2024 through some backdoor negotiations their fathers had made. Their Mandarin was flawless and although they also spoke English, they felt more comfortable communicating in Chinese. Having personally gotten to become close friends with the sons of African elites in China and observed this phenomenon up-close, being in Beijing made me appreciate the scale of it. African flags lining the massive avenues around Tiananmen in anticipation of a visiting African head of state became a common sight, only to be replaced three days later by a different African flag just like clockwork. On Chinese news, I observed how African leaders were wined and dined in the capital and were awed by the dazzling skyscrapers and bullet trains flanked by advisors and associates, all treated with outlandish pomp and circumstance. This past summer, I noticed more and more large African delegations at government facilities like the meeting of the 全国总工会 (All-China Federation of Trade Unions). My personal experiences living in Beijing and my Angolan friends are part of what inspired me to write this paper.



革命的友谊 (亚洲、非洲、拉丁美洲朋友们参观中国人民革命军事博物馆)¹
Revolutionary Friendship (Friends from Asia, Africa, and Latin America visit the Museum of the Chinese Revolutionary Army)

¹ 沈家琳, 革命的友谊 (亚洲、非洲、拉丁美洲朋友们参观中国人民革命军事博物馆), 1964, 宣传海报, 上海人民美术出版社, <https://chinese-posters.net/posters/e15-648.php>.

Historical context and background of Chinese engagement with African elites

[1] There exists a certain kind of Western amnesia about Chinese involvement in Africa. The origins of the modern relationship really began in the 1950s when colonial rule was crumbling from liberation movements that swept the continent just as the Cold War was heating up. The US and USSR fiercely competed to win the loyalty of newly independent African states throwing their weight behind rival groups. The US indeed at the time had a historical legacy of educating African political and business elites and then Senator John F. Kennedy and the State Department financed air travel for African scholarship recipients; many returned home to take up leadership positions in new governments.² It might, however, be a lesser known fact that there was a third, more discreet competitor involved: China, and thus Africa was actually a battleground between three main foreign powers. Both Moscow and Beijing initially struggled to compete against the US, whose European partners “had decades if not centuries of experience in dealing with the peoples of these regions and had educated and, to a significant degree, created their elites.”³ China’s primary opponent however wasn’t the US surprisingly, but rather the Soviet Union. Having fallen out with the USSR over doctrinal differences, the two Communist giants became locked in a fierce rivalry for leadership of the global communist revolution and the third world.

[2] At the 1955 Bandung Conference, China declared its intent to help liberation fighters around the world and thus this was China’s dominant foreign policy toward Africa until the end of the Cold War.⁴ During this period, Beijing offered economic, technical, and military support through intelligence, training, and weapons to liberation movements in Algeria, Angola, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Namibia, the DRC, Zanzibar, and more.⁵ And for the first time, China began to receive a steady stream of African guests in Beijing and started government-backed programs to educate current and future elites. Between 1949 and 1960, at least 520 African visitors from 41 countries were welcomed to Beijing and China sought to use these early visits to “shape the political views of impressionable young students and activists” and “actively influence their politics and thought.”⁶ Political parties like the MPLA (Angola) and PAIGC (Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde) received arms, \$20,000 each, and sent ten people for military training in China—tiny in scale at the start.⁷ It was not until 1960 until elite cultivation activities expanded significantly when China responded to the Soviets setting up the People’s Friendship University in Moscow and aggressively starting to recruit African students.⁸ The Communist Youth League of China (CYLC) responded to requests from student groups in Algeria, Chad, Congo, and Gabon to set up a formal structure to actively recruit and educate African students, starting at a modest 100 per year—still small.⁹ “The CYLC hoped that a kernel of 100 well-prepared students per year would have a dramatic impact on the revolutionary situations in

² Aubrey Hruby. “China’s educational offensive in African markets.” *The Hill*, December 12, 2018.

<https://thehill.com/opinion/international/420891-chinas-educational-offensive-in-african-markets>.

³ Jeremy Friedman, *Shadow Cold War: The Sino-Soviet Competition for the Third World* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 30.

⁴ Ousman Murzik Kobo, “A New World Order? Africa and China,” *Origins* 6, no. 8 (2013). <https://origins.osu.edu/print/2056>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Friedman, *Shadow Cold War: The Sino-Soviet Competition for the Third World*, 52-53.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 49.

their countries, especially as the planned curriculum was to include special classes on the experience of the Chinese revolutionary struggle.”¹⁰ China also responded to requests for the military training of cadres from African political parties in which “a select few were to be educated in Marxist theory in depth in an effort to form the nuclei of Marxist parties.”¹¹ These programs typically lasted six months and influenced Senegal, Nigeria, Congo, Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika, and others.¹² The PRC encountered some difficulties in educating African students though: it was reported that they often skipped school, refused to stand when the teacher entered the classroom, complained about food quality, bemoaned the lack of closet space, and detested the clear segregation that existed with European students.¹³ The school in response encouraged Chinese students to “be more friendly” and “organize more activities so that they would not complain about racial discrimination to African dignitaries arriving for the October 1 Independence Day celebrations.”¹⁴

[3] Militarily, Moscow and Beijing collided in proxy wars including the Ogaden War, the Rhodesian Bush War, the aftermath of the Bush War, the Zimbabwean Gukurahundi massacres, the Angolan Civil War, the Mozambican Civil War, the Congolese Civil War, and more.¹⁵ China aided the African National Congress and the Pan African Congress and aggressively dispatched military advisors and instructors to train guerrilla fighters at the request of Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, and Sekou Touré.¹⁶ China also cultivated close relationships with elites such as Jamal Abdul Nasser (Egypt) and King Hasan (Morocco) with some countries including Tanzania and Ghana electing to adopt a Chinese economic model and industrialization policy.¹⁷

[4] It was during this period from the early to mid-1960s that Beijing unleashed an unprecedented diplomatic and aid offensive seeing the number of high-level African delegations visiting Beijing more than double (37 to 87), aid pledges rising to \$266 million, and trade increasing by 170%.¹⁸ Soon after starting in 1966 though, the chaos of the Cultural Revolution paralyzed Chinese foreign policy and Chinese ambassadors were recalled from abroad. Rapprochement with the US (1972) briefly gave China world recognition and reinvigorated China after a period of diplomatic isolation to make a dramatic comeback, where Chinese involvement peaked and aid actually dwarfed that of the 1960s: from the early-to-mid 1970s, China spent a total of \$1.8bn in comparison to \$428m a decade earlier (also outspending the Soviets at \$1bn).¹⁹ This could be considered the height of China’s Cold War activity in Africa and an impressive parade of African leaders would make the pilgrimage to Beijing in the early 1970s including Joseph Mobutu (Zaire).²⁰ But in 1975, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) abruptly cut China’s foreign aid, and with Mao’s death in 1976, the subsequent ending of the Cultural Revolution, and new leadership under Deng Xiaoping, China disengaged from competition with the USSR, instead charting a path of economic

¹⁰ Ibid., 49.

¹¹ Ibid., 49.

¹² Ibid., 50.

¹³ Ibid., 55.

¹⁴ Ibid., 55.

¹⁵ “Africa-China relations,” *Wikipedia*, last modified November 30, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Africa%E2%80%93China_relations.

¹⁶ Friedman, *Shadow Cold War: The Sino-Soviet Competition for the Third World*, 54.

¹⁷ Ibid., 55.

¹⁸ Ibid., 119.

¹⁹ Ibid., 198-199.

²⁰ Ibid., 199.

reform.²¹ By the late 1970s, the Soviet Union had declared victory. Many African nations actually cut off relations with China in the mid-1970s in protest of China's active support of the US and South Africa during the Angolan Civil War, and it wouldn't be until much later in the 1990s, when China would "come back" to Africa, this time in pursuit of building economic trade relations.²²

[5] Therefore, there is somewhat of a myth about China's "non-interference doctrine" in the domestic affairs of other countries. In China's revolutionary past under Mao, China was extremely active in engaging in ideological conflict abroad and it wasn't until his death and Deng Xiaoping's new leadership that completely took China in a new direction. But it was during the Cold War that the foundations for China's relations with Africa were established.

The current situation

[6] China's present-day government-sponsored programs to cultivate current and future African elites is extensive, meticulous, and extremely diverse. In aggregate, there are estimates that around 160,000 Africans have been impacted in some capacity thus far as of September of 2018 and needs to be divided into efforts to influence three groups of elites—individual specific elites and top leadership in political parties, future influential individuals, and a wide array of non-political elites—in what seems to be descending order of priority for Beijing.²³

[7] For *current* political elites, the Central Party School, the main organ behind the training of CCP members, offers leadership and political party organization training for African ruling parties, parliaments, and government officials.²⁴ Since 2014, China has annually invited African political party leaders to Beijing to explain China's "new type of political party system." Participants in the past have included South Africa's ANC, the Communist Party of South Africa, Angola's MPLA, Namibia's SWAPO, Tanzania's Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) Party of the Revolution, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), the National Congress Party of Sudan, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement of South Sudan, Kenya's Jubilee Party, and Zimbabwe's ZANU-PF.²⁵ ²⁶ China considers the CCP to be historically similar to many of these African parties and therefore share many of the same principles: both grew out of armed guerrilla movements fighting for independence, both have roots in socialism, and both have been former victims of Western colonialism and imperialism. China interestingly extends political party training to not only parties currently in power but neutral and even opposition parties as well. This might be seen as Beijing carefully hedging risk, not wishing to alienate groups which may very well hold power at some point in the future, a departure from Cold War-era Chinese strategy. Participants in programs that usually last 10 days learn the "theory and practice of party building, propaganda techniques, cadre

²¹ Ibid., 221.

²² Kobo, *A New World Order? Arica and China*.

²³ Liangyu, "Feature: Belt and Road Initiative helps Africa realize its dreams," *Xinhua News*, September 14, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-09/14/c_137468438.htm.

²⁴ William Gumede, "How China is changing democracy in Africa," *News24*, August 23, 2018, <https://www.news24.com/Columnists/GuestColumn/how-china-is-changing-democracy-in-africa-20180823>.

²⁵ Yun Sun, "Political party training: China's ideological push for Africa?" *Brookings*, July 5, 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2016/07/05/political-party-training-chinas-ideological-push-in-africa/>.

²⁶ Ibid.

development, and the management of interactions between the party, government, and military.”²⁷ They also cover topics such as the “operations of the CCP committees, the reform and opening up of China, Marxist theory, and media management.”²⁸ ²⁹ Trainings cover lectures at Chinese education or training institutions, mentorships, cultural programs to familiarize Africans with traditional Chinese culture, and field trips to local governments to gain first-hand knowledge of how party cadres solve local problems and may interact with local officials, farmers, and businesses.³⁰ But not all training programs are hosted in Beijing, and in fact, only the most senior level African officials are. More common programs for low-level, mid-ranking, and junior African officials are sent to provincial and local party offices. In 2012, China specifically set up the China-Africa Local Government Cooperation (CALGC) which embeds several hundred African local government administrators annually across China to learn about management, administration, and budgeting at the local government level.³¹ Since just last year, more than 1,000 have received training through this cooperation.³² Targeted programs for the youth wings of various African political parties have been growing particularly fast—quadrupling to 2,000 in a decade.³³ The China-Africa Young Leaders Forum has also seen a fivefold increase from 200 to 1000 leaders (from over 40 African governing parties) between 2011 and 2015.³⁴ China has also been funding political training schools in Africa as well, not just in China. The Julius Nyerere Political Education School of Excellence was built by China in Tanzania,³⁵ and the ANC Political School and Policy Institute in Venterskroon, modelled after the China Executive Leadership Academy in Shanghai, will serve as the ANC’s new political leadership school.³⁶

[8] For *future* political elites, the CCP’s scholarship program has grown exponentially over the last decade, seeing a 26-fold increase from less than 2,000 African international students in 2003 to 60,000 in 2018.³⁷ This number dwarfs scholarship programs offered to African students by any other country and in fact, more African students come to China each year from anywhere in the world proportionally.³⁸ Almost all the scholarships are awarded at the postgraduate level, ideally to educate those who are already well-educated and more established.³⁹

²⁷ Paul Nantulya, “Grand Strategy and China’s Soft Power Push in Africa,” *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, August 30, 2018, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/grand-strategy-and-chinas-soft-power-push-in-africa/>.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ He Hui Feng, “In a remote corner of China, Beijing is trying to export its model by training foreign officials the Chinese way,” *South China Morning Post*, July 14, 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/economy/article/2155203/remote-corner-china-beijing-trying-export-its-model-training>.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Jeremy Luedi, “Why African students are choosing China over the West,” *Asia by Africa*, October 15, 2018, <https://www.asiabyafrica.com/point-a-to-a/african-international-students-study-in-china>.

³³ Sun, *Political party training: China’s ideological push for Africa?*

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Trevor Loudon, “Chinese Communist Party Strengthens Grip on South Africa,” *The Epoch Times*, August 1, 2018, https://www.theepochtimes.com/communist-party-of-china-strengthens-grip-on-south-africa_2610110.html.

³⁶ Stephanie Findlay, “South Africa’s ANC Looks to Learn from Chinese Communist Party,” *TIME*, November 24, 2014, <https://time.com/3601968/anc-south-africa-china-communist-party/>.

³⁷ Victoria Breeze and Nathan Moore, “China has overtaken the US and UK as the top destination for anglophone African students,” *Quartz Africa*, June 30, 2017, <https://qz.com/africa/1017926/china-has-overtaken-the-us-and-uk-as-the-top-destination-for-anglophone-african-students/>.

³⁸ Luedi, *Why African students are choosing China over the West*.

³⁹ Ibid.

China also holds educational fairs across Africa to recruit students to attend Chinese universities as well.⁴⁰ One example of these African students is South African Sydwell Mabasa, who already works in provincial government back home and is one of 21 African students completing a master's degree in international communications at the Communication University of China.⁴¹ Benefits of his scholarship include paid flights, accommodation, food, and even a monthly stipend of \$250.⁴² His room, which he describes as a "studio," has two single beds, a desk, a couple of chairs, and an in-suite bathroom.⁴³ Many young Africans view a Chinese diploma as a way to open doors back home as there seems to be a "recognition among young Africans that there are relatively few Africans who can relate to China at all."⁴⁴ As one student put it, "Europe and America are known entities, but China is still a mystery," and to be a China expert is a marketable skill for when they return to their home country.⁴⁵ The Silk Road School based in Suzhou affiliated with Renmin University also opened in 2018 to attract students worldwide to support the Belt and Road Initiative, planning to offer 50 to 100 students comprehensive scholarships covering full tuition.⁴⁶

[9] Other categories of elites that China hopes to influence also include media professionals, journalists, doctors, opinion leaders, engineers, technical experts, academic scholars, military officials, business leaders, and civil society activists.⁴⁷ China's 2015 Africa policy paper proposed inviting thousands of African military officers for workshops and specifically designated the Central Military Commission's Office for International Military Cooperation to manage them.⁴⁸ Since then, the China-Africa Defense and Security Forum welcomes senior military officers from 49 African states to Beijing to visit PLA facilities, demonstrate military equipment, and sign arms deals.⁴⁹ The most recent 2018 FOCAC plan of action called for an ongoing China-Africa Peace and Security Forum as well as a separate China-Africa Law Enforcement and Security Forum.⁵⁰ In the field of law enforcement, China has already begun running an anti-corruption course that aims to train 100 African police officers by 2021 and built a \$30m training centre for Tanzania's military at Mapinga.⁵¹ In 2018, China hosted the 3rd China-Africa Youth Festival that received youth leaders in business, civil society, media, and academia.⁵²

[10] Local governments and individual companies like Huawei also sponsor scholarships of their own and self-supporting African students have been coming to China for decades without any government support mostly

⁴⁰ Eric Olander, "Investing in African Students is China's Longterm Soft Power Play," *The China Africa Project*, October 18, 2019, <https://chinaafricaproject.com/podcasts/investing-in-african-students-is-chinas-longterm-soft-power-play/>.

⁴¹ Simon Allison, "Fixing China's image in Africa, one student at a time," *The Guardian Africa Network*, July 5, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/31/china-africa-students-scholarship-programme>.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Pan Mengqi, "Renmin University of China opens Silk Road School," *China Daily*, May 17, 2018, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201805/17/WS5afd10c0a3103f6866ee8fd3.html>.

⁴⁷ Yun Sun, "The political significance of China's latest commitments to Africa," *Brookings*, September 12, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2018/09/12/the-political-significance-of-chinas-latest-commitments-to-africa/>.

⁴⁸ Michael Kovrig, "China Expands Its Peace and Security Footprint in Africa," *International Crisis Group*, October 24, 2018, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/north-east-asia/china/china-expands-its-peace-and-security-footprint-africa>.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Luedi, *Why African students are choosing China over the West*.

through informal word-of-mouth networks.⁵³ So while the central government is not the only driver, it remains an overwhelmingly central effort.

[11] Two cases stand out in particular: Ethiopia and South Sudan. Ethiopia has been described by some as “Beijing’s most eager student.”⁵⁴ While other countries including Angola, Mozambique, and Tanzania have all been keen to apply China’s model with emphasis on export-led growth, heavy state involvement in the economy, and the development of labor-intensive industries, the East African nation is regarded as the biggest success of China’s model abroad. “The China of Africa” has managed to attain its title by using “Beijing-style state-controlled capitalism like shielding key industries from external competition (i.e. banking and telecom), prioritizing special economic zones (SEZs), foreign investment, and infrastructure development.”⁵⁵ The EPRDF has been sending senior delegations to Beijing since 1994 to study China’s governance system and indeed the party shares many similar features with the CCP: the principle of party supremacy over the government and military, an emphasis on ideological education, and democratic centralism.⁵⁶ Similar features can also be found in the ruling parties of Eritrea, Namibia, Rwanda, Sudan, and South Sudan.⁵⁷ South Sudan, being the world’s youngest nation, is perhaps one of the most interesting cases of Chinese political cultivation. After China moved quickly to be one of the first countries to establish diplomatic relations with Juba and recognize South Sudan the same day they gained formal independence in 2011, the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) secretly dispatched employees unbeknownst to Khartoum to learn more about the new government and make friends with Salva Kiir.⁵⁸ Still in the process of developing political institutions and an economic system, the impressionable young country has been described by the Chinese as a “blank slate” and “a real-world laboratory to try new things.”⁵⁹ Since independence, China has already provided the South Sudanese with 4,100 scholarships and short term training opportunities, but even before South Sudan became a country, China was already hosting officials.⁶⁰ SPLM delegations with bureaucrats from the ministries of culture, transport, and health have been reported to visit monthly to study with the CCP.⁶¹ Even just one year after independence, as many as 10,000 Chinese nationals and 100 Chinese companies were already working in the country.⁶² Anthony Kpandu, in charge of special working groups at the general secretariat for the SPLM led a delegation in 2016 to China and describes his visit: “It was magnificent. You can’t believe it, but it’s there. I’ve never seen anything like it.”⁶³ They visited the Central Party School in Beijing, walked on the Great Wall, and rode

⁵³ Toneo Toneo, “Huawei Partners Zim Gvt, Universities For Talent Development,” *TechnoMag Zimbabwe*, December 3, 2019, <https://technomag.co.zw/2019/12/03/huawei-partners-zim-gvt-universities-for-talent-development/>.

⁵⁴ Sun, *Political party training: China’s ideological push for Africa?*

⁵⁵ Jevans Nyabiage. “Do Africa’s emerging nations know the secret of China’s economic miracle?” *South China Morning Post*, October 13, 2019. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3032551/do-africas-emerging-nations-know-secret-chinas-economic>.

⁵⁶ Sun, *Political party training: China’s ideological push for Africa?*

⁵⁷ Nantulya, *Grand Strategy and China’s Soft Power Push in Africa*.

⁵⁸ *China’s Foreign Policy Experiment in South Sudan* Brussels: International Crisis Group. Accessed December 9, 2019. <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/288-china-s-foreign-policy-experiment-in-south-sudan.pdf>

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Kuo, Lily. “Beijing is cultivating the next generation of African elites by training them in China.” *Quartz Africa*, December 14, 2017. <https://qz.com/africa/1119447/china-is-training-africas-next-generation-of-leaders/>.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Kuo, Lily. “There’s at least one place in Africa where China’s “win win” diplomacy is failing.” *Quartz Africa*, November 21, 2017. <https://qz.com/africa/1111402/south-sudan-china-win-win-diplomacy-struggles/>.

⁶³ Kuo, *Beijing is cultivating the next generation of African elites by training them in China*.

on Shanghai's high-speed Maglev train.⁶⁴ After his trip, he wants to establish a youth arm of the SPLM modeled after the CYLC and was so amazed by China's drone policing technology that he wrote a report recommending his government acquire them from China for security purposes.⁶⁵

[12] China hopes that these increasingly sophisticated campaigns will win the hearts and minds of today and tomorrow's African political, economic, and social elites who will shape the future of the continent and its relations with China. While Beijing certainly hopes that these Africans will "bring back a Sino-centric view of the world and a network of relationships that will serve them and China for decades to come," China still maintains that all of these visits are "exchanges of opinions," dismissing the idea that they are imposing any "China model."⁶⁶ China hopes that African leaders will study the way of governance on issues that they are interested in, but says that whether they adopt the Chinese way is purely and entirely their own decision.

Analysis of China's strategy

[13] It's difficult to assess the impact of China's current efforts on future elites given that the effects won't show up until at least several more decades perhaps in the 2040s or 2050s. Most of this programming has only ramped up in the late 2000s to early 2010s and most scholarship recipients are still in their 30s. But closer to mid-century, these graduates are going to be elevated to positions of power and influence. For Beijing, their experience in China will have hopefully left them "well-equipped to deal with Chinese businesses and officials and perhaps favorably disposed to do so."⁶⁷ But regarding the impact on current elites and government officials, the Chinese development model has surged in popularity and Africans surveyed have overall positive impressions of China. A 2016 Afrobarometer report that surveyed 56,000 average Africans in 36 countries saw 30% of respondents rank the US development model first while 24% ranked China first; 63% said China had a "somewhat" or "very" positive influence in their country.⁶⁸ In three of five African regions, China either matched or surpassed the US.⁶⁹ Other studies have also shown that it's not just African elites that might hold positive views of China, but among the common people, attitudes vary significantly from country to country.⁷⁰

[14] One striking observation is that China's elite cultivation programs in Africa far outstrips that of any other region of the world despite similar or even greater levels of Chinese engagement. One explanation is that by "bringing African students and familiarizing them with China, it helps to counter negative attitudes toward China which have arisen in the wake of the country's growing economic footprint and address misconceptions and misunderstandings about one another."⁷¹ China is addressing what it understands to be an "image problem" and tone down the hyperbole and controversy that has dominated the China-Africa relationship thus far. Part of this is due to

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Olander, *Investing in African Students is China's Longterm Soft Power Play*.

⁶⁷ Allison, *Fixing China's image in Africa, one student at a time*.

⁶⁸ Lily Kuo, "China's model of development is becoming more popular in Africa than America's," *Quartz Africa*, October 28, 2016, <https://qz.com/africa/820841/chinas-model-of-economic-development-is-becoming-more-popular-in-africa-than-americas/>.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Barry Sautman and Yan Hairong, "African Perspectives on China-Africa Links," *The China Quarterly* 199, (2009).

<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/china-quarterly/article/african-perspectives-on-chinaafrica-links/294FDC51C8124084A51C9A69C8D76E63>.

⁷¹ Luedi, *Why African students are choosing China over the West*.

Africa's history of being looted by foreign powers but part of it also has to do with how culturally disparate China and Africa are than most places of Chinese engagement. Another observation is that China's strict visa policies see that the vast majority of African students return home upon graduation—this is most likely done on purpose.⁷² Their role is to form a positive impression but ultimately make their change back in Africa. China does not want them to integrate into Chinese society long term or become Chinese citizens.

[15] China's current tactics, compared to Mao's style of political engagement, are much more focused on economic relations and it's important to remember that the funding for these programs is tiny compared to China's trade and infrastructure activities. But to China, these programs are like venture capital where if even just 1 out of 50 students in the future climbs to a position of considerable power, for the relatively low-cost investment of financing a scholarship, the ROI for China is incredible. This shotgun approach may be informed by China's knowledge of Africa's demographic trajectory and the nature of African elites.

[16] China's selection criteria specifically favours both previous work experience and political connections. China understands that in comparison to other countries, African political elites hold vastly more sway and interact more deeply with China. African leaders have come to monopolize the triad of political, economic, and military power and many have direct control over resource extraction in their countries through the "nationalization and indigenization of foreign and private companies through accumulation by dispossession."⁷³ One example is the Sonangol Group, a state-owned enterprise (SOE) directly controlled by the President of Angola and has been described as a "vehicle for presidential patronage."⁷⁴ The Angolan government also formed the Gabinete de Reconstrução Nacional (GRN), an agency exclusively under the Presidency to manage Chinese credit lines.⁷⁵ As a result, China strategically targets financially distressed SOEs to infuse with capital creating a symbiotic relationship between African elites and Chinese capital in which "Chinese investors are protected and guaranteed success to the extent they provide political elites with rents to finance their political machinery and pay off their clients."⁷⁶ This system of neopatrimonialism maintains a heavy reliance on "inter-elite brokerage, which bypasses domestic channels of debate and accountability."⁷⁷ One example is Amadou Touré, the former President of Mali who personally handled all economic and trade engagements with China together with a small number of close associates.⁷⁸ China also geographically gives more aid to the birth regions of political leaders and regions populated by the ethnic groups to which leaders belong.⁷⁹ With some of the highest rates of political volatility in the world and

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Obert Hodzi, "China and Africa: economic growth and a non-transformative political elite," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, November 20, 2017, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/321184334_China_and_Africa_economic_growth_and_a_non-transformative_political_elite

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Axel Dreher, Andreas Fuchs, Roland Hodler, Bradley C. Parks, Paul A. Raschky, and Michael J. Tierney. *Aid on Demand: African Leaders and the Geography of China's Foreign Assistance* Washington D.C., Williamsburg: Aid Data, 2016. http://docs.aiddata.org/ad4/files/inline/wp3_-_revised_working_paper_series_dreher_et_al_2016_october.pdf

a documented pattern of military-backed coup d'états, China may view Africa's high rate of family-bound political dynasties, handpicked successors, and small inner circles of strongmen where succession becomes more predictable to work in their favor and thus have tailored their strategy accordingly.⁸⁰

[17] China is also fully aware that Africa has the fastest growing and youngest population.⁸¹ By the end of the century, there's a good chance 1 in 3 people will be African.⁸² Africa, therefore fits differently into China's grand strategy than other regions of the world: beyond just undisputed market access to the largest consumer markets of the future, it knows that if African nations are to follow in the footsteps of how China developed, African nations will inevitably begin by leveraging booming populations to work in labor-intensive industry. This would help China industrially upgrade its own economy and to restructure fast-growing African economies around China.

[18] It's also important to understand that these trends have also been influenced by what's been happening in the West. US President Donald Trump reduced Fulbright scholarship funding and stringent immigration policies have sent back African students at a record rate.⁸³ As American schools continue to get more expensive, Chinese universities are a *far* more affordable alternative (even without scholarships) with a semester at Tsinghua averaging just \$7,500 per year.⁸⁴

Criticism

[19] China's cultivation programs haven't been without their own challenges and criticism. A lack of central direction from Beijing has meant that China has yet to establish a "uniform, unified, and merit-based scholarship system."⁸⁵ A wide array of various Chinese embassies, organizations, and businesses are given wide discretion with how funds should be allocated and in most cases, scholarship oversight is delegated to African governments. While the scholarships are meant to serve wider African society, many elites have sent their own children to China. In 2009, it was discovered in Namibia that government elites including former presidents Sam Nujoma and Hifikepunye Pohamba, government ministers that oversaw deals with China, and senior military officers were sending their own children to China.⁸⁶ While some Chinese diplomats deliberately allocate scholarships for elites to use as a carrot or stick to push or reward cooperation from African governments, the CCP does not condone this behavior and maintains that this action might generate anger toward the Chinese in the future.

[20] Africans studying in China also don't always have a positive experience and the efficacy of the programs has been questioned. Many African students have talked about how the Chinese have adopted an "assembly line" attitude applying lax standards.⁸⁷ "For the Chinese it's like you want the paper, so they give you the

⁸⁰ "Political Stability - Country Rankings," *The World Bank*, 2017, https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/rankings/wb_political_stability/.

⁸¹ Gilles Pison, "There's a strong chance a third of all people on earth will be African by 2100," *Quartz Africa*, October 11, 2017, <https://qz.com/africa/1099546/population-growth-africans-will-be-a-third-of-all-people-on-earth-by-2100/>.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Luedi, *Why African students are choosing China over the West*.

⁸⁴ Dana Vioreanu, "Study Abroad in China. All You Need to Know about Tuition and Living Costs," *Masters Portal*, February 4, 2018, <https://www.mastersportal.com/articles/1587/study-abroad-in-china-all-you-need-to-know-about-tuition-and-living-costs.html>.

⁸⁵ Luedi, *Why African students are choosing China over the West*.

⁸⁶ "Scholarships given to the children of senior politicians": 'It's a Scramble for Chinese Scholarships Among Country's Top Brass,'" *Informanté*, October 15, 2009.

⁸⁷ Luedi, *Why African students are choosing China over the West*.

paper and you go home.”⁸⁸ Paradoxically, most African students receive their instruction in English and many students remain in China (if they can) to teach English rather than return to Africa for poor salaries. In some cases, private English tutors in China make more than medical doctors in Ghana.⁸⁹ Other students have talked about how even though China preaches about “engaging as equals in fraternal solidarity through the ideological framework of South-South horizontal cooperation,” the reality is that Africa and China are nowhere near the same levels of development.⁹⁰ While China has made a massive effort to overcome its dangerous pollution, some African students speak of how they can only dream of having the same problem back home.⁹¹

[21] Beijing may also be underestimating African students’ ability to independently think for themselves and resist certain aspects of their education. One homework assignment had students set up a Sina-Weibo account and start micro-blogging, but students recount that whatever was written mostly got deleted.⁹² Given these students don’t pay a dime, China might be surprised that assignments like this are met with such disdain and apathy. It’s worth discussing whether elite cultivation works at all given China’s past Cold War experience. African elites during this period were often able to exploit the geoeconomic competition between multiple competing powers and increase their own power by playing one against the other and deriving economic, diplomatic, and political benefits from all sides. Whoever will pay the most has them as an ally. Americans faced the same challenges too: most famously, Kwame Nkrumah was educated at the University of Pennsylvania and the University College London but his allegiance fluctuated. South Sudanese officials have said that the teaching is rudimentary like how to shake hands or sit with a senior dignitary.⁹³ Others have remarked that trips have mostly been focused on showing off China’s achievements.⁹⁴

[22] The Chinese have also historically lacked the same soft power in Africa as colonial masters like the French and while China’s military and economic power has skyrocketed, China’s abilities to project soft power have miserably failed to keep pace. France is still the top destination for African students and while China boasts 46 Confucius Institutes across the continent, it pales in comparison to the 180 Alliance Française facilities that Beijing directly competes against.⁹⁵ And despite the surge in numbers, hard aid projects and aid-for-trade is vastly more common in Beijing’s armory.⁹⁶

Policy Recommendations and Conclusions

[23] The two polarizing views might be that these programs are either a “brazen attempt to hijack the loyalty of Africa’s ruling classes by going after its youth” or a “genuine effort to provide Africa’s brightest students with enriching opportunities and prepare them for a world in which Africa’s orientation will inevitably shift

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Allison, *Fixing China’s image in Africa, one student at a time*.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Kuo, *Beijing is cultivating the next generation of African elites by training them in China*.

⁹⁴ Kuo, *Beijing is cultivating the next generation of African elites by training them in China*.

⁹⁵ Luedi, *Why African students are choosing China over the West*.

⁹⁶ Sandra Gillespie, “Review Essay,” *Review of China’s aid & soft power in Africa: The case of education and training*, by Kenneth King, *Frontiers of Education in China* 9, no. 2 (2014): 274-277. <http://academic.hep.com.cn/fed/EN/abstract/abstract10905.shtml>.

easterward.”⁹⁷ After understanding China’s history of engagement with African elites and reviewing the evidence, I’m somewhere in the middle. Indeed one day, a future African leader may have perhaps studied at Tsinghua, may speak some Mandarin, and may be at the head of a government populated by colleagues that share similar experiences in China. But these questions remain speculative and uncertain. While Africans being educated in Africa would be an ideal and eventual goal, it may not be the most realistic at present given the valuable experience and skills that returning Africans can bring back to the continent. What shouldn’t be uncertain though are two things: Other countries including the United States should actively provide a counterbalance and an alternative to China’s lucrative opportunities by providing scholarships of our own, making higher education more affordable, and reducing visa restrictions for Africans wishing to come to study or work. What’s clear is that while Africans might be welcome for temporary exchange in China, they are less welcome as long-term residents and the US should do everything in its power to ensure that we keep our doors open. Competition is healthy and if future African elites end up adopting the Chinese political and economic model and it results in lifting millions from poverty just as China has done, I can’t imagine how criticism might emerge then. Adams Bodom, director of the Global African Diaspora Studies Research Platform and professor of African studies at the University of Vienna put it best: “The young Africans are not robots and *tabula rasa* such that the Chinese will just stuff them with whatever they want. The students will take the best of China and leave the bad there in China and go back to Africa.”⁹⁸ What remains most imperative though is that Africa and Africans are not taken to be passive subjects of global competition, but rather assert their own powerful agency in global politics. It’s ultimately up to the judgement and wisdom of Africans themselves to chart a future for their own countries, independent and irrespective of what others may wish upon them.

⁹⁷ Allison, *Fixing China’s image in Africa, one student at a time*.

⁹⁸ Kuo, *Beijing is cultivating the next generation of African elites by training them in China*.

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