Foreword on “China in Africa”

Tukumbi Lumumba-Kasongo
African and Asian Studies

Since the end of Cold War era, especially after its accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in December 2001, China has intensified its economic, cultural and political relations with Africa. Thus, the debates on the nature of relations between China and Africa’s most visible actors: states, private and state-owned corporations, and individuals (students, adventurers, laborers, experts) have just started. Because of the magnitude of the Chinese activities in some African countries in investment, trade, and economic sectors, which until recently were mostly dominated by the industrial countries and their major transnational and multinational financial institutions and corporations, these particular relationships are being more scrutinized with an acute passion. China has been perceived as, or even called by many in Western Europe, the United States and also in Africa, a neo-colonial or neo-imperial power, which does not respect the rules of the game with its “dragon gifts.” Many Chinese have been accused of being racists at home and in their workplace in Africa.

Numerous newspapers and magazines, the world over have been publishing articles dealing with the movements of China in Africa and their socio-economic implications. There is an urgent call among the Sino-African and Sino-European-American intellectuals and academics – the mainstreamers, centrists, and the leftists – for making a critical examination of the nature of these relationships, as to understand their ultimate intent, social and economic and political implications in the long run, and impact on the fragile African economic, environmental and political conditions.

The peripheral and vulnerable nature of the place and the role of Africa in the operations of the world economy and that of China in competing with the first industrial countries for the number 2 spot in such an economy, its demographics, and its unique ideology of “Socialism with the Market Economy” make the emerging discourses emotionally and ideologically attached.
The signs of this intensity are reflected in the African Internet listservs and in the academic networks. However, the interconnection between intellectuals and academics, and African policymakers and politicians on how to engage China collectively is still weak. Because of the African past and present experiences, any complex foreign actions or unclear behaviors between the African states and other parts of the world are likely to be filtered through the assumptions of the conspiracy theory.

However, the dynamics of China in Africa or Africa in China constitute a set of complex layers of interactions that are conditioned and determined by political references of the past struggles, human experiences of adventurism, the imperatives of agencies of neo-realism, and those of liberal globalism known also as neo-economic liberalism. Since 1978, through its economic reforms, China has produced a development paradigm that, in the eyes of many scholars, seems to be “ideologically foggy,” but economically pragmatic in its determination to improve the socio-economic conditions of the Chinese. The imperatives of these reforms within push-pull theory are also conditioning some Chinese to move out of their country to look for manna in Africa. However, China succeeded in an unprecedented manner, between 1978 and 2005, to uplift more than 400 million people out of poverty. This enormous credential basis has given China a global passport in its relations with Africa. China is pursuing its commercial and economic interests in Africa with confidence and with the expectations and assumptions of win-win theory among its partners. The fact of the matter is that Africa is also finding new opportunities to acquire new technologies, foreign capital, human capability, and scientific knowledge from China.

Methodologically, it is necessary to emphasize that there are many Africas, both in terms of the actual number of countries, diverse cultures, political experiences and various levels of economic development that define the African continent. Personal relations, intersectionality between social class and gender issues should be taken into account depending on the relevance of specificities of countries and subregions, as part of the new methodology. There are no monolithic Chinese groups that are migrating to Africa. Migration theories that explain people’s movements from “China to Africa and from Africa to China” should be critically examined within a broader framework of cost-benefit analysis as articulated by the states, private corporations, and individuals in a long term. It is important to establish a big

---