



An ambivalent partnership

The AFRASO programme shed light on the complex relations between Africa and Asia – with a focus on China

By Uta Ruppert and Stefan Schmid

China as a neocolonial power that is exploiting Africa and expanding its sphere of influence – this cliché in Western perception does not stand up to closer scrutiny. The AFRASO programme at Goethe University Frankfurt explored the broad range of interactions between Asia and Africa.

China in Africa: hardly any other topic has triggered such heated debate in African studies in recent years. Mainstream Western media portray a familiar picture of China in Africa: China's efforts are merely cleverly packaged strategies to secure for itself the African continent's immense wealth of natural resources and expand Beijing's power. In sharp contrast, China's narrative claims that its relations are the product of a "historical alliance of countries and nations formerly oppressed by the West". African voices are meanwhile particularly critical of the West's insincerity, which is undoubtedly pursuing its own interests in Africa. In contrast to the West, China is valued for not interfering in Africa's internal affairs and for treating the African states as equal trading partners rather than a problem child.

Emerging research

Rather than accepting these overly simplistic standpoints, a research programme at Goethe University Frankfurt aimed to understand the complexity of African-Asian relations and realities, to explain contradictory developments and to position their potential and challenges within the constitutive patterns of international policy and the global cultural developments of the 21st century. "Africa's Asian Options (AFRASO)" (2013–2019) was conceived as an inter-centre programme of the two interdisciplinary centres for East Asian Studies and for African Studies and funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research. AFRASO's research focused on the following questions: What new opportu-

nities and options are emerging for Africa in cooperation with Asian countries? Which features can be identified in the various facets of this South-South cooperation? Which new forms, perspectives and transregional ideas – realities that span continents – are emerging and how are they influencing the multipolarity of the world order?

Before AFRASO was launched, such questions had hardly been asked in German-speaking African studies – and certainly not from an interdisciplinary perspective ranging from economics, political science and anthropology to cultural, literary and linguistic studies. AFRASO also covered new ground by looking at Asian countries beyond China such as Malaysia, South Korea, Japan and India, countries which have often been overlooked in international research. Malaysia was important to AFRASO's research due to its pivotal role in training African students, and South Korea was selected as a role model in development policy. As one of the Four Asian Tigers, South Korea has succeeded since the 1980s in achieving rapid industrialisation and established an export-led economy. With regard to Japanese-African cooperation, AFRASO was particularly interested in the approaches of Kaizen institutes in training African entrepreneurs and small businesses in line with Japanese operational and staff management practices. India was of great importance in its leadership role in the Non-Aligned Movement and as a source of ideas for social developments. As one of the oldest regions of commercial trade between Asia and Africa, but also of

**1 Chinese shop in Cape Town/
South Africa**

transnational thinking and remembrance, the Indian Ocean was also of central interest in the AFRASO programme. Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines and Vietnam were considered as countries with a wide range of interpersonal relations, for example in relation to commercial travel or labour migration. In this context, AFRASO examined the role and experience of Vietnamese workers in Angola and the networks of female West African traders in Bangkok and Jakarta.

China repeatedly at the centre of debate

Nevertheless, AFRASO's research often focused on Chinese-African relations. Due to its size, diversity and long history – trade relations, for example, date back to before colonialism – China plays a special role.

In post-war history, the Bandung Conference in 1955, which was attended by many African and Asian countries, marked a crucial starting point for the Non-Aligned Movement, which united most of the countries of the Global South and was highly significant during the Cold War, especially in the 1970s within the framework of the United Nations, as the “third force”. Since the member states often acted in a coordinated manner, the non-aligned countries became influential in the international system – even if they were ultimately unable to achieve major goals such as that of a new world economic order. Following Bandung, China's aid for Africa took on more assertive forms, including logistical, material and financial support for African national liberation movements. The construction of the Tanzania-Zambia Railway (TAZARA), which was financed by China in the early 1970s and enabled the two African countries to bypass the apartheid states and export raw materials, is still regarded as a

symbol of Chinese-African friendship in the spirit of anti-imperialism. At the same time, however, the TAZARA project also gave the Chinese access to Zambia's copper reserves.

The myth of supremacy?

Perceiving China's relations with the African countries as purely friendly in the 20th century holds as little weight as the notion of China in the 21st century as the dominating neocolonialist power with the sole ambition of pilfering raw materials. There is no doubt that access to raw materials is China's main concern in Africa. In reality, however, the processes involved are much less guided by a unified Chinese state than is often assumed. Indeed, Chinese-African economic relations are largely driven by a mixture of individuals, family businesses and companies, which are in general not controlled by the Chinese government. This is particularly true of the many Chinese traders striving to make a living on an individual basis in almost all countries on the African continent.

The same applies for Chinese “land grabbing” in African countries. Using Benin as an example, AFRASO was able to show that the extensively discussed ruthless Chinese land grabbing is by no means the dominant form of land investment in Africa, where China lags far behind domestic and major Western investors. The picture is similar in the raw materials and mining sector, which the media like to portray as the main area of Chinese hegemony.

Chinese investors are primarily active where Western companies have already prepared the ground with their investments and now want to offload them due to security concerns. In contrast, Chinese companies – for example in the Central African Republic – are prepared to make both risky and long-term investments that are not particularly attractive for Western companies, especially if they are listed on important stock exchanges with corresponding legal and reporting obligations. In these cases, neither “neocolonial exploitation” nor “economic relations based on solidarity” serve as suitable explanations.



2 Chinese clothes shop in a shopping centre in Johannesburg/South Africa.





IN A NUTSHELL

- China as a neocolonial power in Africa: this is how Western media like to portray China's role in Africa. The reality, however, is much more complex. This was one of topics of the AFRASO research programme.
- Asian-African relations have a long history. The conference of the Non-Aligned Movement in Bandung in 1955 marked the starting point of collaboration as partners and in solidarity against the West.
- Contrary to popular assumptions, China does not act in the first instance as a central neocolonial power, but exerts its influence in Africa through individuals, companies and family businesses. These relations are not unilateral: African stakeholders have also discovered China and other Asian nations as partners for politics and trade or as a study destination for themselves.
- Nevertheless, Chinese-African relations are not always harmonious and free of mutual prejudices.

Different and disparate patterns of cooperation can also be found in cultural and political cooperation between China and Africa. AFRASO's study of Confucius Institutes in Africa showed that China is much less political and orchestrating in African policy than assumed. Rather, Confucius Institutes try to adapt to local conditions and usually emphasise certain aspects of traditional Chinese culture such as calligraphy or tea ceremonies. For Africans, Confucius Institutes represent an interesting educational option, for example for upgrading their academic degrees and thus increasing their chances on the labour market, not least in China.

AFRASO also found that the rhetoric of friendship and partnership on an equal footing is just as beneficial for the African side as it is for the Chinese in political relations. While China emphasises above all its position in world politics through these networks of friendship, the Chinese model of the controlled developing state also serves as an internal role model for political elites in various African countries. For civil society stakeholders on the African continent, however, these South-South political alliances are less interesting, as AFRASO's study of Chinese-South African cooperation in the field

3 Street scene during the evening in Guangzhou, the city in China with the largest African community. In 2020, more than 13,000 people of African origin lived here, most of them students or traders.



4 A delegate registering for the first AFRASO conference in Kuala Lumpur, 2014.

5 Confucius Institutes are widespread and popular in many countries in Africa – shown here is the sign of the institute at the University of Dakar, Senegal.

6 Chinese-Senegalese rice project: to increase production, new methods and rice varieties are being tested.

of gender policy showed. It is true that some South African stakeholders in institutional gender policy, for example from ministries and other state institutions or even groups of female entrepreneurs, are working to establish more intensive relationships with their Chinese counterparts. However, stakeholders from autonomous women’s movements pursuing concerns such as combating violence against women distance themselves from the various forms of state-led cooperation and instead seek partnerships in the diverse networks of transnational social movements that encompass South-South as well as South-North relations.

Transregionalism is not a one-way street

AFRASO thus contributed in several ways to a scientific nuancing of the popular image of China in Africa. China is neither omnipresent nor unassailable: China’s relations with Africa usually serve its own political and economic



interests, but are not fundamentally more neocolonial than Western relations with African countries.

The newly emerging forms of African-Asian transregionalism, which became increasingly central to AFRASO’s analyses over the course of the research programme, are certainly not symmetrical in nature, but instead shaped by all participants and generate benefits on all sides. Africa is also in the process of discovering Asia for itself and taking advantage of new opportunities. For example, AFRASO showed that China is an important destination for African traders, who have settled in large numbers and are beginning to invest in a future there. Although this influx is increasingly met with resistance from the population, cities, especially in the south of China, are still among Asia’s most attractive options for students and traders from all over Africa, who are forming the nuclei of a new African diaspora in China.

Thanks to the presence of traditional Chinese medicine in Africa, another important African-Asian connection has emerged: Chinese doctors in Mali have become an integral part of society, while traditional Chinese remedies have become established in South Africa in competition with traditional African medicine.

An end to harmonious relations?

Since 2019, however, the image of the new South-South Alliance and the new brotherhood



between the nations has become increasingly tarnished. On the one hand, there have been repeated and clearly racist incidents against African students in China, which have greatly damaged China’s image in Africa. There are also increasing reports in Africa itself that Chinese companies are not complying with applicable labour or environmental laws, for example in Zambia’s mining sector. In other African countries, Chinese family businesses are pulling out of retail because of their poor economic performance or because governments, such as in Senegal, have introduced legislation to regulate

trade. In many places, for example, Chinese traders are only allowed to sell goods that are not offered by local shops.

And in Africa, too, there is racist resentment against companies and immigrants from China, triggered by the displacement of local companies, disregard of occupational health and safety and environmental laws or the way Chinese business owners treat their staff on a day-to-day basis. The coronavirus pandemic has put a sudden and so far permanent end to people's mobility and the award of scholarships, and what happens next remains unclear. Finally, the enormous debt of African countries, which has accumulated in the course of often gigantic Chinese infrastructure projects, is currently also a pressing issue. For example, Uganda has already had to hand over its only international airport in Entebbe to China, which is hardly a sign of unswerving South-South solidarity.

At Goethe University Frankfurt, research on African-Asian relations continues. For example, researchers in the project "Cultural Entrepreneurship and Digital Transformation in Africa and Asia (CEDITRAA)" are studying the cultural industries of selected African and Asian countries, together with colleagues from the University of Mainz. ●



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(Selected publications by AFRASO staff)