

**Public Perceptions and Reactions:
Gauging African Views of China in Africa**

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Abstract

While economic and political ties between China and Africa have grown substantially in the last years, our understanding of African perceptions of China is still limited. Those pieces of cross country survey data which are available draw a positive picture of African perceptions of China but surveys are not comprehensive and only consider various African countries as a whole. Starting from here, this paper looks into how opinions on China form in different parts of African society, using case studies from unions, political elites and civil society. It comes to the conclusion that trade has an overall bigger impact on popular perceptions of China than FDI, which has been the focus of much literature. While a rising trade deficit has an overall negative impact on perceptions of China, increased Chinese trade is perceived positive by consumers that get more competitive prices and small scale vendors. Civil society organizations in Africa sometimes show critical opinions but

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are also increasingly engaged by China. Western Media generally tends to portrait China's relations with Africa in a more negative way, than it is perceived by most Africans. Several studies confirm that Africa is the continent that on average holds the most positive views on China.

Key words: China, Africa, public opinion, perception, labor unions, political elites, civil society.

Introduction

The growth and intensifying of China – Africa relations has recently given rise to the question of how Africans see their new partner country. Opinions are difficult to generalize about, as China already plays many different roles in Africa and therefore produces a multi faceted relation that is no less complex than that of Africa with any Western power. Considering this complexity, the generally negative sub tone of Western media reporting about China in Africa is surprising.¹ The picture that has emerged however through some recent surveys and studies is that Africans generally see China in a much less negative way than often portrait by Western media. Also the diverse roles that China has started to play have led to more nuanced views by Africans. In a survey the majority of people stated that Chinese Businesses generally help the economic development of their country, while acknowledging some problems that they create.² One sided China bashing or unconditional approval has become the exception.

Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations, Vol. 9, No. 4, Winter 2010

Opinion Surveys on African Perceptions of China

As China deepens its cooperation with Africa, it is essential to critically observe African perceptions of its increasingly important partner. The relation has in the last year grown more and more complex, and it is difficult to generalize about African perceptions, both what regional groupings and different parts of society are concerned.

A good starting point for an overview however is the BBC World Service Poll that is conducted in cooperation with PIPA and Globescan. This poll asks the question whether citizens of one country describe the influence of another country in the world as mainly positive; mainly negative or neutral. The survey for the year 2009 has been conducted across 21 countries, including China as well as three African countries, Ghana, Nigeria and Egypt. (see appendix of this paper) It is remarkable that out of all countries that took part in the survey it is these three countries in which most people hold mainly positive views of China. (Ghana 75%; Nigeria 72%; Egypt 62%) This score is also especially considerable when compared to the average of all countries that took part in the survey of 39%. For comparison, the countries in which least people describe China's influence as mainly positive are Japan and Germany with 8% and 11% respectively. What is also interesting, are the trends in perception over time. The average mainly positive perception of China fell from 45% in 2008 to 39% in 2009. Negative views of China increased in France from 46% to 70% from 2008 to 2009, while during the same timeframe positive views of China in Ghana

Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations, Vol. 9, No. 4, Winter 2010

increased 56% to 75%.³

At the same time, a Gallup study looked at the perceptions of China in Chad and compared them to those of France and the US.⁴ For France 28% of the Chadians expressed favorable and 54% unfavorable views; for the US, 50% vs. 28%; for China, 52% vs. 19%.

This is particularly interesting since the survey was done in 2006, when Sudanese and Chadian armed forces clashed, with China supporting Sudan. When the same survey asked about the people of the respective partner country, 51% of Chadians expressed negative views towards the French 29% towards Americans and only 24% towards China.

A year later, a similar survey was conducted in Sudan (excluding Darfur), which highlights the contrast between perceptions towards China and the US. Here 48% of the adult population expressed negative views towards the US, compared to only 26% for China, and the “very unfavorable views” were even three times higher for the US than for China.

Another study, the Pew Global Attitudes Project from the year 2007 largely confirms that Africa is the continent that holds on average that best opinions of China.⁵ (see appendix of this paper) Within their sample, Mali and Tanzania are the countries with the most positive views about China, with 92 % of the population expressing favorable views. Kenya, Senegal, Mali and Nigeria follow suit with 81%, 81%, 75% and 75% of favorable views respectively. For comparison, while Ivory coast, Kenya and Ghana are the countries in the sample that have the most positive views of the US,

public opinion in these three countries is still more favorable towards China than towards the US.

The other regional blocks that have also largely positive views of China, are South America and Asia (excl. Japan) however not on levels as high as in Africa.

Within the African continent it is South Africa that has the lowest opinions of China, with only 44% of the population expressing positive views about China. Of all the countries with available data for the previous year, Nigeria is the only one in the world (within the sample) where public opinion rose from 2006 – 2007. At the same time they have fallen significantly in Japan, India and most parts of Europe.

Sub Saharan Africa is also by far the most favorable region when quizzed about the effect of China's growing military power for their country. In Ivory Coast, Kenya, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal and Ghana over 50% of the population considers Chinese military power as a good thing for their country, with Ivory Coast leading the table with 87%. Similarly high rates of approval can otherwise only be found Pakistan, Bangladesh and Malaysia. For comparison in most of Europe, the US and Russia only 10-20% of the population consider growing Chinese military power as a good thing.

When looking only at the economic rise of China, out of the 7 countries with the most favorable views, five are from sub Saharan Africa. Again leading the table, in Ivory Coast, Kenya and Mali, over 90% of the population considers an economically strong China as a good thing for their own country.

Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations, Vol. 9, No. 4, Winter 2010

Perceptions on Chinese Influence in Africa

The comparison with the US is interesting when looking at how African citizens feel about foreign influence in their countries. In Tanzania for example, about the same amount of people think that the US influences their country as there are people that think that China influences their country (47% and 50% respectively) When asked about how they feel about this influence only 36% of Tanzanians consider the influence of the US in their country as a good thing, while 78% say the same for China. The trend can be observed for all other Sub Sahara African countries except South Africa - even though at a smaller margin. When looking at trends of influence, 79% of the Senegalese say that Chinese influence is growing in their country, while only 51% would say the same about the US.

It is fairly safe to say that Africa, especially sub Saharan Africa except of South Africa is the region of the world that holds the most positive views about China. Nevertheless this data does not say much about the internal composition of African views on China or about the views of different parts of the society. It can be local incidents that influence public opinion and it is necessary to look into several case studies to gain a better understanding of how China is perceived in different parts of Africa. In a public opinion survey in Cameroon for example, 70% of the respondents said they were “disturbed by the Chinese influx” while at the same time 92% in the same survey admitted the China is good for Cameroon’s economy. Also, 81% welcomed Chinese products, which benefited poorer

parts of the population, as they tend to be cheaper than equivalents of competitors. Also the business opportunities of retail of Chinese products were acclaimed positively. (see the Senegal retailer's case study in this paper for a similar argument) Quizzed about who benefits most from the links with China, 70% responded the government (e.g. through grants) and 30% responded the poor (e.g. thought cheaper goods) ⁶

The current discourse around African perceptions of China focuses a lot on China as a new player in Africa and perceptions of China are put into contrast with perceptions of other countries. The main role that China plays in Africa is often seen as that of an investor. Questions will therefore be asked in relations to the results of this kind of engagement. When trying to capture African opinions of China in Africa, it is however essential not to focus exclusively on the current status, but also look at the evolvement of these perceptions over time. It is wrong to see China as a "New Player" in Africa, and therefore consider its perceptions as a result of most recent engagement. China might have new relations with certain industries and parts of society, but this is not to say that even for those China is a white sheet of paper.

Instead African perceptions of China should be seen as a result of different roles that China has played in Africa, and then go into the specifics of certain parts of society.

Different Roles of China

The roles that China plays today in Africa are diverse. Depending on which aspect one looks at, one will get different perceptions from the local population. In the same way China's role in Africa has been enthusiastically appreciated and bitterly condemned by outside observers.

A welcome aspect is the leverage that Chinese engagement gives Africa in relations to other powers or the donor community. When previously for example only one partner was interested in a certain infrastructure project, increased competition translates to higher bargaining power for the African part. It is also often said, that China tends to be more risk taking in its investments, channeling funds into regions that other countries would be more hesitant to engage in, bringing capital to the areas where it might be needed most.

Then there is China as a provider as consumer goods. As Chinese businesses enter the African retail market, prices for consumer goods fall and might become available for the first time for certain parts of the society. This is definitely good news for the consumers that are able to buy their first washing machine or air conditioner. In cases where the product has previously not been produced locally but imported, little resistance can be expected locally, as these products mainly stand in competition to products that were provided by Western companies.

It is however a different story for the retail sector as such. As an increasing amount of Chinese businesses enter the market for delivering the

products to the final consumer, a squeeze is felt amongst the African retailers that have previously imported from China and then sold to the end producer. (see the Senegalese case study in this paper)

Popular criticism of China's investments in Africa often comes as a result of low standards of environmental assessments, labor safety and or harsh working conditions. At the same time pro Chinese observers point out that "oil-for-infrastructure' contracts are providing Africa with what it needs - quality capital that actually funds investment, jobs for its people and that delivers growth"⁷

It is also the large scale infrastructure projects that attract a lot of positive echo because of the multiplier effect they have. As a Chinese company is rebuilding a road in northern Kenya that links with landlocked Ethiopia, new trade routes and further opportunities open up. This road used to be a British colonial dream, which also the later Kenyan government failed to build.⁸ These important infrastructure projects that other actors were not able to deliver are naturally very well perceived by the African public. Yet there are also critical opinions about these kinds of projects, pointing out the high percentage of Chinese workers involved in the construction, not creating enough employment for the population.⁹ While this is an important argument as such, it overlooks the fact these projects open up a range of other economic opportunities that can be exploited by the local population.

Together with the practice of importing labor from China, comes the

Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations, Vol. 9, No. 4, Winter 2010

question of integration that has been frequently stated. While some observers describe Chinese forming separate societies that hardly get in contact with the African population, another study shows that Africans consider Chinese individuals equally or better as adapted to African local society as their Western counterparts.¹⁰

Another common criticism is that Chinese investments in oil and mining operations make it difficult for African countries to continue to diversify their economy and leave them vulnerable to price shocks on the commodity market. At the same time Chinese imports undercut domestic products, especially in the labor intensive area where some countries could gain a competitive edge. This has effects on the local consumption of goods as well as on the establishment of a country's own export orientated industries.

The way that China does business in Africa is also subject to highly polarizing opinions. Sahr Johnny, Sierra Leone's ambassador to Beijing was famously quoted:

We like Chinese investments because we have one meeting, we discuss what they want to do and then they just do it. There are no benchmarks and preconditions, no environmental impact assessment.¹¹

The attitude of "getting things done" is surely appreciated by African counterparts, especially when dealing with projects that have been delayed

or abolished previously with other partners. As long as everything goes well, this approach surely has positive effects on perceptions of China in Africa; it is only when problems arise that could have been avoided through different planning that popular perceptions can quickly turn negative.

The approach of providing investments to Africa in a straight forward and unconditional way obviously also has an influence on other partner country's agenda. In 2005 for example the World Bank prepared a loan over \$5 million to invest into Nigeria's railway infrastructure. The contract was full of various conditionality measures in order to fight corruption in the Nigerian railway system. Just when the loan was about to be signed, China put forward a proposal over \$ 9 billion to invest in the whole Nigerian railway network, without conditions or need to reform.¹²

It is a common criticism that China's unconditional support renders western conditional Aid ineffective. While it is true that some African countries prefer investments that come without requirements for reform, it is much harder to estimate what this means for the development of the respective country. The track record of archiving good governance through conditional aid has never been very compelling; investments that stimulate the economy however almost always have a positive knock-on effect.¹³ As long as these projects deliver what they promise, public perception tends to be influenced in a positive way, as possible abstract benefits from conditional aid are quite intangible for some parts of the population.

This is of course different when African individuals are directly

affected by Chinese companies that don't comply with certain standards and requirements. An incident that is frequently quoted in this context is the Zambian Chambishi copper Mine which is operated by the Chinese state enterprise, NFC Africa mining. In 2005 an explosion killed 45 Zambian workers and the reason for the explosion is often claimed on the low safety standards in which the mine was operated. This incident had a strong impact on public perceptions of China, as will be described in detail elsewhere in this paper.

Another factor which can have negative influences on public perception of China in Africa, are adverse results of certain large scale infrastructure projects for the local population. An example would be the Merowe dam in Sudan which has led to displacement of small farmers along the riverbanks.¹⁴

Today China plays many different roles in Africa. The largely positive views that have been found in public opinion surveys can be highly fragmented throughout different regions and parts of the society. China plays the role of an investor, a donor and a competitor at the same time. Depending on which aspect one looks, one will get different perceptions of China.

The lack of systematic analysis of the African perceptions of China is commonly known and has been pointed out many times. David Shinn, former US Ambassador to Ethiopia and Burkina Faso, for example questioned in 2006 “[...] how much we really know about African publics’

perception of China.”¹⁵ As Ndubisi Obiorah writes, the impact of China’s trade with Africa [...] as well as the activities of Chinese businesses operating in Africa deserves extensive and careful study and analysis. It is however immensely difficult to describe popular perceptions of China in Africa with a tolerable degree of accuracy because this is a new field of scholarly enquiry and reliable information beyond anecdotal sources is hard to come by.¹⁶

Unsatisfied with this status, there have also been attempts to analyze African perceptions of China with quantitative methods.

Quantitative Analysis of Perceptions

One interesting study in this field has been published in January 2010 as an Afrobarometer working paper.¹⁷ To systematically analyze African perceptions of China, the researchers establish four hypotheses:

- The greater the levels of Chinese foreign direct investment in African states, the greater the level of African support for Chinese involvement in the continent.
- Increasing levels of Chinese imports into Africa negatively impact upon African popular perceptions of the Chinese.
- Africans are more likely to express unfavorable views of the Chinese if they attach particular importance to matters of human rights.

- Africans are more likely to express negative views of the Chinese if they are supportive of democracy.

The first hypothesis summarizes the view that Chinese FDI has positive effects on development and brings benefit to the people and increases positive perceptions of China. This captures China's role as an investor.

For China's role as a competitor the variable of Chinese imports has been chosen. This makes sense for the kind of imports that stand in direct competition with products that can be produced locally, but not for the ones where Chinese imports stand in competition with Western ones. For products in direct competition we can however expect the quantity of imports to stand in inverse proportion to popular perceptions.

The third hypothesis is related to China's different requirements for cooperation. As China does not attach conditions (e.g. for respect of human rights) to its investments, it can be expected that those Africans that want to see pressure on their own government to prefer cooperation with Western countries. The same is true for the fourth hypotheses and China not requiring political reform toward democracy in order to grant cooperation.

The researchers then tested these hypotheses by using data from previous Afrobarometer surveys from 20 African countries, while controlling for other variables.

Overall they find very positive views on China. On the question "How much does country X help" China scores about the same as the

former colonial powers, only marginally lower than the US, and significantly higher than South Africa and Nigeria (see appendix of this paper)

For the first Hypothesis, the relationship between the two variables turned out to be weak and statistically insignificant. The study therefore comes to the conclusion that the relation between Chinese FDI and perceptions might have previously been exaggerated.

For the second hypothesis however a statistically significant relation can be found between the imports from China and its perceptions. (see appendix) Also it was found that with an increase of exports to China (e.g. decreasing the trade deficit) China becomes more popular.

For the third hypothesis survey data was used that asked about the current human rights situation in the respective countries. The regression then showed that the individuals that were more critical to the human rights situation were also more critical towards China. The statistical significance of this finding was however low.

For the last hypothesis the survey asked about the importance that Africans attach to elections in their country. The hypotheses that those individuals that attach great importance to democracy will be more critical towards China did however not find any empirical support,

Another study¹⁸ looked how perceptions of Africans towards China are composed throughout society. In a regression it found that females were 14 % more likely to see China's policies as harmful to their country, so were

Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations, Vol. 9, No. 4, Winter 2010

people over the age of 55 (by a margin of 9.6%)

The most interesting finding of the study is however that that all other variables that have been controlled for, have shown not be statistically significant. Ethnicity, educational background, rural/urban distribution or income, are all statistically less significant than the one single variable of country of origin. Kenya, Sudan and Ethiopia were mostly positive towards China with relatively little variation of this view throughout society; Botswana and Zambia most negative and Nigeria, Ghana, Egypt and South Africa in the middle. This is interesting, since it shows that opinions towards China might be more developed on a national level (e.g. through media, political campaigns) and depend more on how links with China affect the country as a whole, rather than different parts of the society.

Interesting conclusions about perceptions of China can also be found in the more detailed questionnaire. All African countries, except of South Africa (which has a much higher GDP than China) that were interviewed, considered China's path of development as a positive example for their own country.

In Ethiopia, Sudan and Kenya, over 80% responded that China shares many or some common interests with their country, whereas in Zambia only about 50% agree with that. Zambia is also the country where a majority of the population (58%) sees China's only interest in Africa in natural resources, followed by Sudan (51%), Ethiopia (46) and Botswana (41%). This is little surprising, as Zambia and Sudan are also amongst the

African countries that receive most Chinese investments in the natural resource extraction sector.

Asked about the Chinese “non interference policy”, in Sudan 77% of the people consider it as a “good policy for Africa”. Equally in Botswana, Ethiopia, Egypt, Kenya and Zambia large majorities can be found, with positive views outnumbering negative views by twofold.

The often cited negative impacts on development of local businesses structures have not been confirmed in many African views. In Kenya about 60% of the respondents claimed that Chinese small businesses are being helpful for local economic development. Also Ghana, Nigeria and Sudan respond positively about this question, in other countries opinions are more mixed with many respondents choosing “Help, but are also a source of problems for local people”.

In the two countries, Egypt and Sudan most people also claim that Chinese people in Africa are more adapted to local society than citizens of western countries (72% and 65%). On average African opinions on this question are however split almost equally.

All countries by large margins rate Chinese as hard working, twice as many consider them friendly rather than unfriendly and very few (2.6%) consider them racist.

Probably the most interesting finding in these studies is that trade has a much higher influence on African popular perceptions of China than FDI. This is interesting, because much of the literature on China- Africa

relations focuses a lot on investments. At the same time it is not really surprising since trade overall has a larger impact on the lives of ordinary people than some particular investments. The fact that the country of origin is the single most important factor determining African opinions on China is an interesting finding that might be controversial to some traditional views.

To approach the study of perceptions with quantitative methods can bring a certain insights and help to dismantle some myths. Nevertheless it might be more helpful to look into how certain parts of African society react to China on a case by case basis, and then try to draw some conclusions from that.

Reactions

To understand how different parts of African society react to China's increasing links with the continent, it is worth looking into various case studies. For this paper, examples from African political elite, labor unions and African civil society have been selected.

Unions

Unions can be a powerful player in the representation of the right of a certain group and are an essential part in any negation process. Traditionally unions in Africa have been less organized than in some Western countries and this fact once again comes to bear in the relations with China.

An interesting case can be found in Senegal's capital, Dakar where

the impact of the arrival of Chinese traders has been well studied.¹⁹

During the 1980s the Chinese construction company Henan Construction had a contract to build several soccer stadiums in Senegal. Some of the Chinese workers that were employed in this project soon realized that Senegalese traders sold Chinese products with huge margins on the market. The traders at that time traveled to China themselves to purchase their supplies. So some of the employees of the construction company sensed business opportunity, and decided to stay in Senegal. Due to a better network of contacts back in China they were able to import the same products cheaper and passed this difference on to the end consumers.

By selling good and affordable products, the Chinese became fairly popular within the population. Also Chinese retailers functioned as wholesalers for Senegalese that had migrated from the countryside to the capital and sold these Chinese products on street markets. For these people this was a new opportunity, as they would have previously not been able to import directly from China. The well connected and more powerful Senegalese traders that had previously dominated the retail business however lost their margins and often went out of business. In this new context they turned to the trade union UNACOIS (National Union of Senegalese Retailers and Industrialists) which then organized protest to draw the attention of the government to their situation. Their goal was to reestablish their economic order where they imported from China, which means that the protests were not directed against the Chinese products as

Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations, Vol. 9, No. 4, Winter 2010

such, but rather against the Chinese traders. Faced with increased pressure, the Chinese traders started to turn to their embassy, which did however not take the issue as a priority. While UNACOIS continued protests and tried to drive out the Chinese, the consumers as well as the street vendors were actually happy with the Chinese presence. As a result, the Association of Senegalese Customers (ASCOSEN), organized a large counter protest to defend the Chinese and criticized the xenophobic nature of UNACOIS's demands. Especially since the Chinese wholesalers provided the economic basis for a large number of Senegalese small scale vendors, the government decided not to support UNACOIS's demands. With the Chinese embassy remaining relatively uninvolved in the traders concerns, they established a Chinese chamber of commerce (the Senegal Chinese Business Association) to represent their interest, which remained however mainly committed to the economic issues such as lowering rent for shops and shipping costs. The Chinese community in Dakar continues to face resistance from the group of business people that lost parts of their revenues through the arrival of Chinese traders. It is however a fact that those who benefited from the Chinese as consumers and street vendors by far outnumber the former group, which means that the attitude toward Chinese is a generally positive one.

Another example that concerns large parts of the local population and therefore has the potential for active union engagement is the employment policies of many Chinese MNCs. For various reasons those companies often prefer to employ Chinese nationals rather than locals. In

2006 the number of Chinese workers to come to Angola was estimated to be 30,000²⁰ and 100,000 workers came into Nigeria the same year, as a part of a project to upgrade the local railway infrastructure.²¹ In one of Sudan's largest construction projects, the upgrade of an oil factory near Khartoum, a third of the workforce is Chinese.²² From the Chinese perspective, this approach is not surprising. Projects need to be finished in time and within budget and with Chinese labor fewer complications can be expected. Other reasons are language barriers and what has frequently been cited as a different work ethic. Different sources echo the view that Chinese tend to work harder than Africans.²³

Unsurprisingly this has raised a lot of criticism from local workers for whom it is difficult to find jobs, and from international observers who have been very critical to the Chinese practice of importing labor.

Faced with this situation, the role of labor unions is very central. In Angola for example where unions are weak, Chinese nationals dominate much of the construction businesses. In Tanzania or Zambia on the other hand Unions have successfully lobbied for quotas of local workers that have to be fulfilled in foreign funded projects. As Dembisa Moyo writes, criticism against the practice of importing labor from China is understandable, but wrongly addressed to China. It is the responsibility of the African governments in cooperation with their respective labor unions to create a legal environment in which also the local workers benefit from Chinese investments.²⁴

Political Elites

A frequently quoted example of a political campaign run against Chinese presence in Africa is Michael Sata's presidential campaign in the October 2006 elections in Zambia.

Between independence in 1964 and 1990, copper production in Zambia fell from 70,000 tons to 228,000 tons.²⁵ The industry badly needed new investments, and in 1998 the China Non-Ferrous Metal Mining Group bought the defunct and bankrupt Chambishi mine in north-central Zambia for \$20 million. In combination with that, Chinese companies invested \$200 million in copper smelter in the same location. Under Chinese management the copper mine soon turned back into profits, but the working conditions in the mine notoriously harsh and African workers were poorly paid. Due to weak labor law enforcement, the Chinese company paid about \$14 as an entry salary which is significantly below the national minimum wage of \$68.²⁶ Out of 2200 workers only 52 had a permanent contract of employment, which stands in contrast with on average half of the workforce in other Zambian mines²⁷

At the same time cheap imports from China undercut production of local companies especially in the textile sector. This momentum was used by Zambian opposition leader Michael Sata to run an election campaign focusing heavily on anti-Chinese rhetoric and declared that "Chinese investment has not added any value to the people of Zambia."²⁸ He also

referred to Taiwan as a sovereign State, as a result of which Chinese ambassador to Lusaka Li Baodong announced serious consequences in case Sata should win.²⁹ Li also added that additional investments by the Chinese business community would be halted until the bilateral question was clarified. Incumbent president Mwanawasa quickly responded by stating that Sata's comments were unfortunate and appealed to the Chinese to rescind their threat to pull out their investments.³⁰

When on April 20th 2006 an explosion in the Chambishi Mine killed 45 Zambian workers Sata's rhetoric turned even more hostile and Zambians attacked Chinese run shops in Lusaka.³¹

While Mr Sata lost the election overall, he won huge majorities in the areas of Zambia where Chinese investment were most significant. His defeat once again prompted a day of anti-Chinese riots in the capital, with Chinese shops being attacked.³²

This case study is an example where hostility against the Chinese has been taken to the extreme with the support of political elites. Together with maybe Lesotho in the 1990s the Zambian case remains however the exception rather than the rule.

The reactions of the African elites to China depend very much on their own relationship to their constituencies. In those countries where the elites have exclusive control over the country's resources, they tend to actively seek the contact with China. As many of China's investments come in the energy and natural resource sector, elites tended to prefer ties with

Chinese businesses as they look to capture easy profits in this sector.³³ It's only when Chinese businesses get more deeply embedded in the country's economy, and the population feels negative impacts or competition from China, that political elites might try to gain advantage out of anti-Chinese rhetoric. In the Zambian case it is also telling that it was the opposition leader rather than the incumbent president who lead a campaign against the Chinese. As China puts a lot of effort in fostering good relations with the current regime, it is not surprising that the opposition parties are often the ones who criticize China most. This can range from the opposition party in Botswana criticizing the terms of a Chinese loan for a housing project³⁴ all the way to the Movement for Democratic Change in Zimbabwe, which describes Mugabe's link with China as an alliance with their oppressor.

It has often been pointed out that the Chinese African relation is an elite one, with civil society not being able to catch up with the pace that elite ties develop. Indeed China puts a lot of effort to keep good relations with the elites of African politics. It is however only natural that this approach cannot be entirely inclusive. With increasing involvement in Africa, elites also tend to polarize in their attitudes towards the China.

Civil Society

International NGOs have long played a key role in raising awareness of environment or human rights related problems. As China's role in Africa can only be expected to increase, local and international NGOs will

undoubtedly be an essential part in this relationship. As Chinese companies are sometimes engaged in environmentally and socially vulnerable regions, it is also in the interest of China to cooperate with various civil society groups to detect potential problems before they actually create tensions. It is however the different way in which Chinese and Western governments understand the role of civil society that makes this study of civil society in this context especially interesting.

Taking the case of the Merowe dam in Sudan that was financed to a large degree by China, it was a local civil society organization that did the only genuine study of the dam's likely environmental impact. It is important to emphasize that the NGO was not generally opposed to the construction of the dam but that they were proposing a different strategy in the resettlement in order to give the farmers a better chance to sustain their livelihood. In fact the farmers were eager to discuss the project through platforms like this NGO with the financiers including China. Since the Merowe dam project is a highly contested one³⁵, civil society can help to negotiate between the parties.

When African civil society organizations pointed at worrisome developments with regards to either social or environmental impact, China was often quick to react and offer to fund a "social good" such as building a hospital or financial assistance towards the perceived problem. The \$3,5 million towards the AU peacekeeping force in Darfur in 2006 can be seen as an example of reaction to the increased criticism of civil society groups

about China's investments in the oil industry in Sudan.³⁶ This is to say that China has also used information coming from civil society to gauge perceptions of the population and if appropriate, react accordingly.

Others argue that the “naming-and-shaming“ strategy that international and local NGOs have used with Western companies that don't comply with social and environmental regulations is less likely to work with China in Africa.³⁷ The idea is that since Chinese civil society is less organized, Chinese MNCs are less likely to encounter actual consequences if they become associated with negative headlines.

This view is however increasingly outdated, as companies become aware of the importance of global branding. Huawei, SINOPEC or Lenovo have global operations and recognize the potential pitfalls of being associated with human right or environmental issues in Africa. The “naming-and-shaming” strategy is no less likely to bring about results with Chinese than with Western MNCs.

In a study about ways to fight illegal logging by Chinese companies in Africa, the WWF also points at global branding. As good reputations become increasingly important for Chinese timber processing companies, this also opens up a new way to assert pressure to conform to local logging regulations.³⁸

What is true for companies is in a way equally true for the Chinese government. As China becomes more and more aware of the importance of its own perceptions abroad, it is also increasingly reactive to avoid being

associated with negative headlines.

Local NGOs have pointed out the risks of shipment of Chinese light arms to fragile regions in Africa. At the first FOCAC meeting in 2000 China has committed itself to fighting against illegal trafficking of light arms in Africa, and NGOs can capitalize on this. If this strategy is maintained, it might well lead to Chinese government reconsidering its relations with countries where it has only marginal interests, in order to keep positive perceptions.

Of course this supposes a highly organized civil society in Africa with good links to their Chinese counterparts. It has however repeatedly been argued, that while political and economic ties between China and Africa develop fast, links between civil society organizations lag behind.

One attempt to overcome this shortcoming was the first meeting of African and Chinese civil society organizations which took place in Shanghai in May 2007 parallel to the annual African Development Bank meeting. The meeting included representatives from China, Kenya, Egypt, Sudan, Zimbabwe, Benin, South Africa, Mozambique, Burma, the Philippines, the Netherlands, UK, USA, Brazil, India and Australia. Goal of the meeting was to exchange views and foster people to people contacts within various civil society networks. This is to say that meetings of this kind are not to either praise or criticize China's engagement in Africa or ask whether its worse or better than that of Western partners, but rather to find ways how to hold their respective governments and companies accountable.

Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations, Vol. 9, No. 4, Winter 2010

Chinese Civil society differs quite substantially in the way it is structured from African counterparts. First and foremost it often enjoys the direct support from the Chinese government, which is not the case in the same way for Africa.³⁹ Parallel to the FOCAC 2009 meeting for example China also organized a meeting under the theme of increasing mutual understanding, promoting exchanges and cooperation which acted as a platform of exchange and cooperation for NGOs from China and Africa.

Western governments have always promoted and supported African civil society as a part of their effort to establish good governance. As China has a very different approach and emphasizes non interferences in internal politics, it is still to be seen in which way Chinese support for African civil society is going to play out.

Western governments support civil society as a way to promote democracy and as a watchdog for compliance with human rights and environmental regulations, as has been stated by organizations such as the World Bank, the DIFID or USAID.

China on the other hand sees civil society organizations as a partner on humanitarian issues, a way to bridge welfare gaps and to fill the holes where state support is diminishing.⁴⁰ Because of this different understanding, the Chinese government becomes also more open to formation of civil society.⁴¹

At a meeting between Chinese and African civil society in Nairobi, Professor Li Anshan from Beijing University voiced concerns about the

funding of many African civil society organisations. Many of those depend on financial support from Western countries, which can come with a certain agenda. He also questioned whether the source of funding might be related to how some African civil society organizations perceive China.⁴²

In a summary, popular perceptions of organised African civil society towards China are difficult to assess. It depends very much on the particular issue under discussion and arguably also on the funding of that particular organisations. The active engagement of civil society organizations is however a Western concept and we can therefore expect that African civil society organizations are close to Western concepts, including democracy and human rights. This is however not to say that African civil society organisations show generally negative attitude toward China. In fact they realise that China increasingly takes them serious as a partner for dialog and a source of information to avoid potential conflict. China itself also grew more supportive towards organized civil society, domestically and abroad.

Yet the role that civil society is going to play in China- Africa relations is far from clear. In a way civil society is a grey zone for China between its policy of non-interference and an attempt to engage in Africa. It is unlikely that China will start to fund African civil society organizations in the same way the West does, but increasingly understands how important civil society organizations are as a partner.

Conclusion

Considering how fast the economic and political ties between China and Africa have been growing, it is surprising how little we know about the popular perceptions of Africans towards their increasingly important partner. The most prominent research institutions that focus in international public perceptions have until now failed to deliver detailed survey of African views towards China. The pieces of survey data which is available, is however surprisingly positive. In many categories, including the rise of Chinese military capabilities, African countries have the most positive views of China in the world. China is also rated as one of the countries that has the largest influence on various African countries. African views of China might be better understood as a result of Chinese trade, rather than as a result of Chinese FDI as one research shows. In fact, different attitudes are not necessarily between Africans and Chinese, but often between parts of the African population that benefit from Chinese engagement, and those who don't. The question of trade is therefore far from clearcut. Chinese trade can have benefits for a large share of the population, including small scale vendors and consumers that benefit from more competitive prices. They can constitute a powerful group that can capitalize their good relations with China. Whether Africans that attach greater value to human rights and democracy have a different view towards China could not be statistically proven.

It is however interesting that the single most important factor

determining African perceptions of China is the respective country of origin, rather than other variables, such as age, gender, income or rural/ urban distribution. This means that opinions of China are mainly formed on national levels through media and political campaigns, rather than in more fragmented parts of society.

China puts a lot of importance to good relations with African political elite, which in respect holds generally positive views of China. This however opens up space for political opposition which might try to capitalize an anti- Chinese agenda.

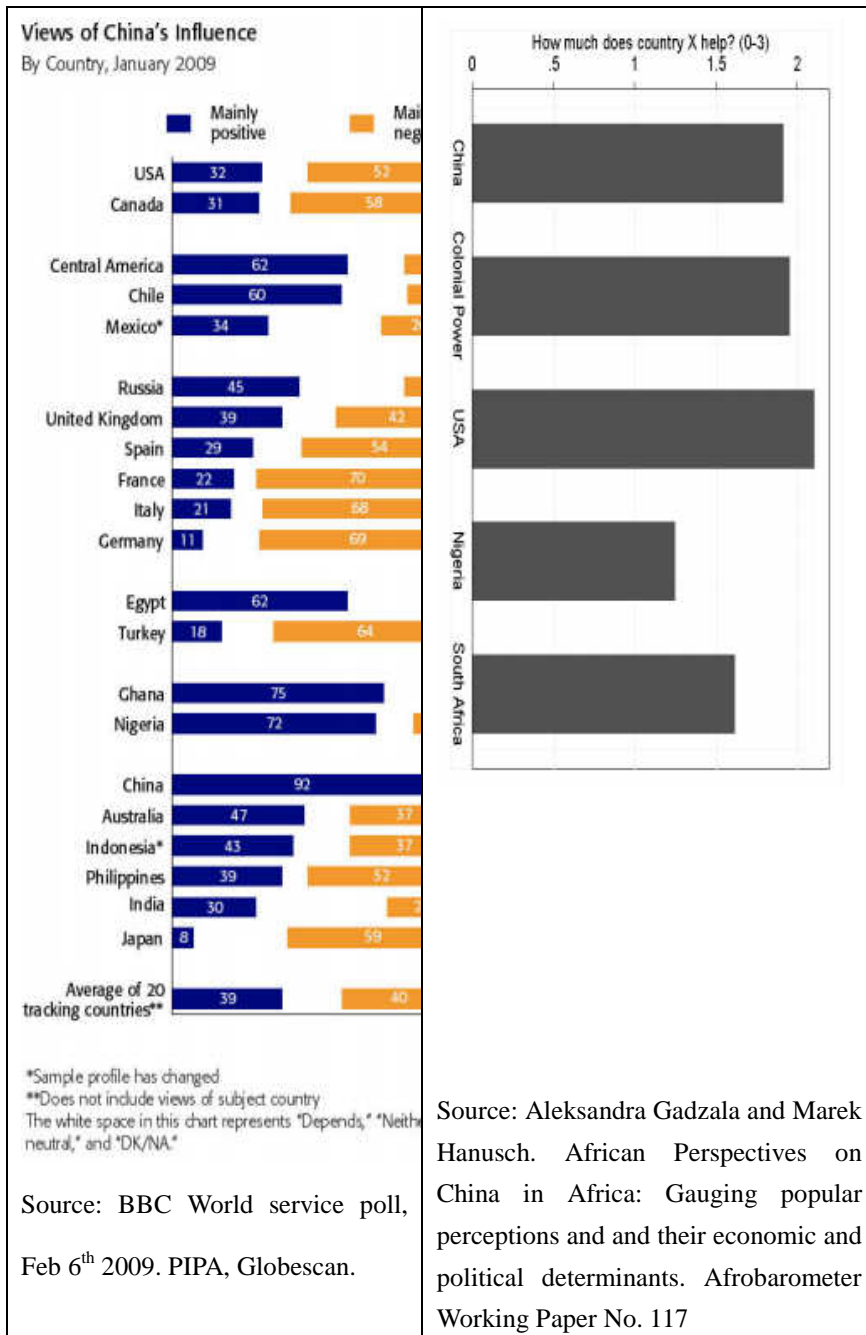
When looking how different parts of society organize in reaction to China, the effect of unions is remarkable. In countries where unions are traditionally strong and represent a large part of the population, they can bargain better conditions for their members. This is another way of saying that Chinese companies bring in Chinese workers and pay low wages to locals whenever the legal situation allows it while it complies with them when law and enforcement mechanisms are in place. Besides, both Chinese companies and the Chinese government become increasingly aware of the dangers of being associated with negative headlines, and therefore become increasingly reactive to pressure of civil society groups to change certain policies.

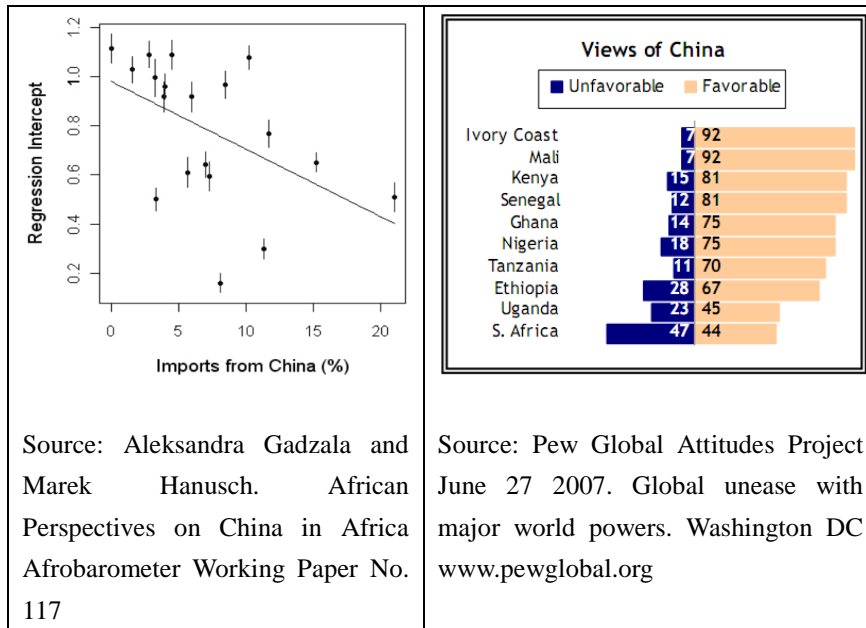
The role of African civil society and its perceptions of China are particularly difficult to judge. They depend on the variety of its nature and the different issues in which it engages with China. African civil society

organisations are often funded by western governments and are therefore particularly sensitive towards issues related to democracy and human rights in their relations with China. At the same time China also becomes more open towards civil society in Africa and also started to support dialogue with civil society organisations as part of FOCAC. It is however still very difficult to judge the role of civil society in China Africa relations, first because it is a relatively new field, where a real Chinese strategy has not yet developed, and second also with regards to domestic civil society organisations, China has different definition than the West.

As we can only expect the China Africa relations to grow in both scale and intensity, the study of popular perceptions between the two regions should be encouraged. This has to include both, crosscountry surveys as well as in depth analysis of different parts of the society. While African perceptions towards China at the moment can be described as positive, cases such as the Zambian illustrate how fast this can change. Constantly monitoring the changes perceptions might is therefore necessary and might well help to avoid potential conflicts.

APPENDIX





Source: Aleksandra Gadzala and Marek Hanusch. African Perspectives on China in Africa Afrobarometer Working Paper No. 117

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