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EXPLAINING THE IMPACTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON CHINA- AFRICA RELATIONS

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The COVID-19 pandemic, which started in Wuhan, China, in late 2019, entered Africa through Egypt, with the initial reported case in February 2020. A case was later found in Nigeria in sub-Saharan Africa, and the virus subsequently spread across the continent. Not surprisingly, the pandemic has affected relations between China and African countries, making an already complex relationship much more problematic to navigate in the face of a global health crisis that has shut down borders and boardrooms, impacting every aspect of human endeavor.

In the twenty-first century, China has expanded its diplomatic and economic engagements in Africa.¹ China's relationship with various African countries has elicited both celebration and concern.² The controversial parts of this relationship include the unequal economic partnerships between China and African countries; the debt burden of African economies as they continue to access Chinese loans; the exploitation of Africa's natural resources by a seemingly resource-hungry China; and China's apparent aloofness in encouraging democratic reforms among undemocratic African partners.³ On the other hand, China-Africa relations feature expansive and beneficial trade among the economies; technology transfers that often accompany development aid and loans; security benefits that are hugely significant for some parts of Africa; and most visibly, the transformation of Africa's infrastructure landscape with Chinese finance and labor resources.⁴

So, for a rather multilayered and persistently scrutinized relationship, the global pandemic offers more avenues for dialogues about diplomatic distrust and economic exploitation. This has been particularly so, as COVID-19 has the potential to impact Africa's already frail economies, which would necessitate help from China, a global economic power with expanding influence on the continent. This pandemic raises further questions about an already unequal partnership. How has this particular global health crisis affected relations between China and Africa, and how can we teach our students these impacts with the nuance that is needed for understanding this important diplomatic relationship?

This chapter draws attention to some key factors to consider in evaluating and teaching about China's growing presence in Africa, particularly during this global health crisis. First, the chapter lays out the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the relationship between Africa and China, showing how this disorienting period has highlighted some significant debates about it. Next, it addresses issues to consider as we offer, teach, and engage explanations about China-Africa relations within the context of uncertainty resulting from the pandemic.

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on China-Africa Relations

The COVID-19 pandemic affected every region of the world. Expectedly, like in most developing parts of the world, economies in Asia and Africa were considered to be susceptible to the destructive effects of the novel virus. As the origin of the virus, China has received global condemnation but has also served as a model for its mitigation measures. With the first reported case on February 14, countries in Africa have been commended for staving off the expected spread and effects of the pandemic but also cautioned by the World Health Organization (WHO) about the increasing number of COVID-19 cases. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has warned African leaders of the potential destructive effects on economies on the continent.⁵ Generally, the emergence and global spread of COVID-19 has intensified some ongoing debates that are presently impacting and will continue to shape the twenty-first-century character of China-Africa relations.

As the COVID-19 pandemic deepened in early 2020, the call for Chinese debt cancellation for African economies gained momentum and relevance. According to the American Enterprise Institute's (AEI) China Global Investment Tracker, the total value of Chinese investments and construction in Africa is close to \$2 trillion since 2005.⁶ A large portion of this is from loans and other forms of foreign assistance. Because of the pandemic, there was decreased demand in global markets for a wide range of African exports, disruption in global supply chains that deliver inputs from regions like Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, and reduced foreign direct investments (FDI) as economic partners from other continents redirected capital locally.⁷ Amid such uncertainties, economic growth in Africa

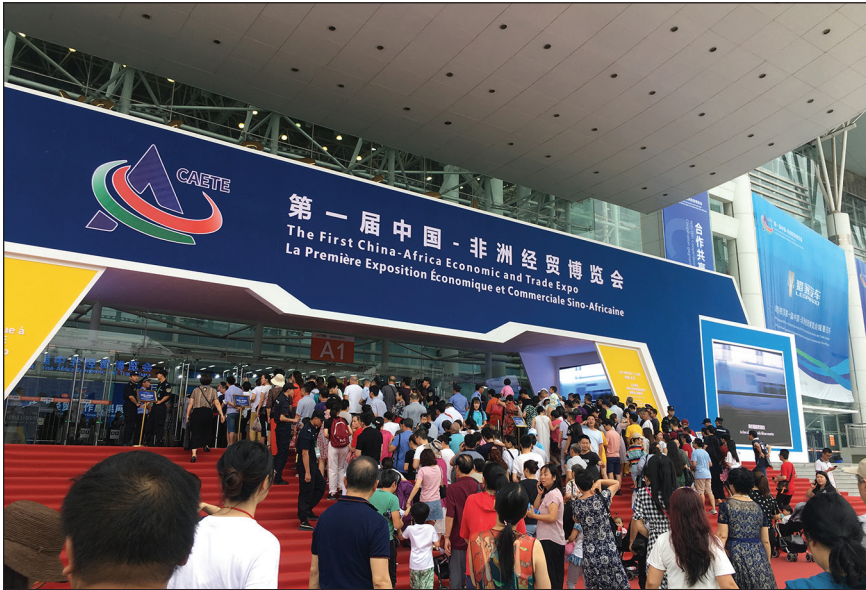


Figure 1: The first China-Africa Economic and Trade Expo, Changsha, Hunan, China, June 29, 2019.

is expected to shrink by an unprecedented 1.6 percent in 2020, according to the IMF.⁸ Depending on predicted scenarios, Africa's economies could lose between \$90 billion and \$200 billion in 2020.⁹ These figures bring to the fore the issue of debt cancellation, as countries across Africa have been accumulating debt through Chinese loans over the past two decades. As Africa's largest single state creditor, Chinese debt relief or forgiveness is considered a vital gesture to ensure a smooth post-COVID-19 economic recovery. France has called upon Beijing to consider debt relief to African countries, echoing the World Bank's call on G-20 leaders to render debt relief to the world's poorest countries.¹⁰ China has reportedly granted some relief to its African debtors, though this does not constitute complete debt forgiveness but rather relief on zero-interest loans. In response to the issue of debt relief during this pandemic, the Chinese Foreign Ministry stated that "China supports the suspension of debt repayment by least developed countries and will make its necessary contributions to the consensus reached at G-20."¹¹ During a virtual conference in April 2020, the G-20 agreed to suspend the debt payments of the world's poorest (including African) countries based on a liquidity availability assessment by the World Bank and IMF, starting from May 2020 to the end of the year.¹² As this pandemic continues to negatively impact African economies, pressure will grow on China (in partnership with other developed economies) to provide greater debt cancellation.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has spread slowly and unevenly across Africa, poor health care infrastructure and services means that more foreign assistance will be required if the pace of spread accelerates. This has opened up opportunities for the delivery of foreign assistance or humanitarian aid. To contain the pandemic, China's support is needed to provide ventilators and personal protective equipment (PPE) for African hospitals and health care workers.¹³ Beijing has endeavored to step in and provide assistance to African countries, as have individual Chinese philanthropists, such as Jack Ma, whose donations have been widely reported. With a seeming competition between Western nations and China in Africa, the Chinese assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic has other global political implications. Such gestures echo sentiments of Asian-African allegiance from the 1955 Bandung Conference—rhetorical devices China has often capitalized on to strengthen its diplomatic and economic engagements in Africa. Chinese aid could be another manifestation of goodwill in China-Africa relations, particularly when China's assistance is often perceived as having undermined the development of African democratic freedoms.¹⁴

Expanded China-Africa relations have led to the rise of anti-Chinese sentiments in African countries and anti-African propaganda and clashes in China. The COVID-19 pandemic has extended existing tensions between locals and migrants, leading to the expression of deadly xenophobic sentiments in parts of both Africa and China. Within African communities, friction between the locals and Chinese migrants has intensified over the past two decades as Chinese capital and businesses have moved into these neighborhoods. The anger in these aggrieved constituencies is often exploited by political opponents who stoke anti-China rhetoric.¹⁵ Locals in countries such as Kenya, Zambia, South Africa, and Ghana have expressed concern about living side by side with Chinese migrants, arguing that since COVID-19 originated in Wuhan, their migrant neighbors would spread the virus.¹⁶ Anti-African violence also broke out in Guangzhou in April 2020, which saw maltreatment and discrimination toward African residents. These anti-African sentiments were founded on the unproven notion that African residents were spreading the coronavirus in their neighborhoods. Authorities responded by subjecting them to discriminatory forced quarantines, tests, evictions, and other forms of harassment. When such events are reported around the world, they create a positive feedback loop that thrives in this pandemic period of uncertainty and crisis. Vivid side-by-side portrayals of this subject matter are found in many news reports and documentaries such as *Laisuotuo*, a short film that explores the burdens of African and Chinese migrants in China and Lesotho respectively.

Explaining China-Africa Relations during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Over the past two decades, China-Africa diplomacy has been under scrutiny, especially by Western actors who often caution African countries about the effects of an unequal economic partnership with China. In short, accusations of neocolonialism have dogged this relationship. Not surprisingly, the pandemic is bound to complicate a seemingly uneven dynamic by offering more examples of inequity, with China as an exploitative global power and African economies as weak and incapable of responding to the unfair economic incursions of their dominant faux ally. For instance, Chinese PPE donations to Africa (like many of Beijing's diplomatic gestures), caricatured as *mask-diplomacy*, could be perceived as underhanded diplomatic overtures to curry economic favor from African regimes, particularly at a time when Africans are most in need of external support. Additionally, as COVID-19 leads to economic uncertainties, some African economies already indebted to China will likely need more resources from the global economic power, which will further deepen the debt problem for these countries. How do we use the pandemic to teach and discuss the multiple aspects of China-Africa relations? As educators, we must parse through China's diplomatic policies and encounters with African countries—most useful at an uncertain time when attention to detail may be overlooked.

First, to narrowly construct and interpret engagements between China and Africa (at any period) without a recognition of or reference to some of the main concepts and contexts that have served as bedrocks to China's current foreign policies toward Africa is to discount the needed nuance to objectively frame this twenty-first-century relationship. In Africa (and most parts of the developing world), China's appeal has been enhanced by the noninterference doctrine, in which China refuses to interfere in a partner's domestic affairs, even if the principle is untenable in other realms.¹⁷ Some scholars have argued that precepts like the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence inform China's noninterference doctrine, as do traditional Chinese cultural concepts such as *weizheng yide* (rule by virtue), *renzhi* (rule of benevolence), and *guanxi* (networks).¹⁸ Additionally, historical context matters in China-Africa relations. This relationship has been through anti-colonial struggles and the vicissitudes of the Cold War. Current Chinese engagements in Africa are grounded in their historical solidarity during anti-imperialist struggles in Angola, and China's encounters with Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, Libya, Sudan, and Liberia at the 1955 Bandung Conference in Indonesia. China's diplomatic rhetoric toward Africa often draws on its status as a noncolonizing power and a developing country that has an understanding of the economic plight of African countries, compared to the exploitative experience of Western colonizers in Africa. Even today, these partnerships still value the Asian-African fraternal links as embodied

in the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC).¹⁹ To understand and fully explain the impacts of the China-Africa debt burden, uneven trade, foreign aid dependency, and the surge in anti-China and anti-African sentiments, all of which have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, we must recognize the principles and historical contexts that inform current China-Africa discourses.

Most research and discourse on China-Africa relations are often centered on state-to-state diplomacy, which means that the voices of political elites are often privileged above that of the masses. For instance, the oft-reported African acceptance of Chinese investments is mostly supported with statements from African government officials and political elites, not with the testimony of the popular masses who often experience the intended and unintended outcomes of these investments. There are variations among the voices of individual Africans—both within states and between various states. Research shows that there are different archetypes of China-Africa partnerships that depend on the economic nature and stature of each particular African country. For instance, Ethiopia and South Africa are considered to have well-developed partnerships with China relative to Côte d'Ivoire's nascent partnership.²⁰ These diverse relationships present different opportunities and challenges for the local dwellers, which might not necessarily match the intended objectives of the politicians and elites in power. Similar to other China-Africa issues, consideration of the wide-ranging impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic should account for voices of the political elites and, most essentially, the interests and concerns of the common people.²¹

Finally, when teaching about China-Africa relations during the COVID-19 pandemic, we must carefully scrutinize the many myths and memes that often impact the relationship. Over the past two decades, myths about China's unconditional lending to African countries, the lack of African agency in Chinese-funded projects, and the neocolonial relationship have eclipsed serious considerations of these matters in China-Africa relations.²² As COVID-19 spreads across Africa, the myth that China has donated masks and medical equipment contaminated with the coronavirus to African countries has unnerved recipient populations.²³ Memes depicting African indebtedness to the Chinese generalize and trivialize the rather nuanced explanations of the issue and are circulated widely on the internet.²⁴ Periods of uncertainty heighten the production and use of such myths and memes, and the tendency to overlook them without adequate interrogation and investigation offers distorted explanations of China-Africa encounters. Short documentaries such as *The New Scramble for Africa* and *China's African Gold Rush* allow students to engage and analyze some of these myths and memes.²⁵

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic will certainly leave wide-ranging and lasting impacts on the twenty-first century. This era will also be defined by China's expansive reengagement of African countries—a feature of interest in global politics for the past two decades. The pandemic will most likely negatively impact the pace of economic development in the regions of Africa, while China will also continue to influence Africa's search for economic independence. COVID-19 presents possibilities, opportunities, and approaches for educators to present a balanced analysis of China-Africa relations in uncertain times.

Notes

¹ See Chris Alden, *China in Africa* (New York: Zed Books Ltd, 2007); and David H. Shinn and Joshua Eisenman, *China and Africa: A Century of Engagement* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

² See Howard French, *China's Second Continent: How a Million Migrants Are Building a New Empire in Africa* (New York: First Vintage Books, 2014).

³ See Ching Kwan Lee, *The Specter of Global China: Politics, Labor, and Foreign Investment in Africa* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

⁴ Deborah Brautigam, *The Dragon's Gift: The Real Story of China in Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁵ "Coronavirus: Africa Could Be Next Epicenter, WHO warns," BBC, April 17, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52323375> (accessed July 10, 2020); IMF, *Regional Economic Outlook: Sub-Saharan Africa: COVID-19: An Unprecedented Threat to Development* (Washington, DC: International Monetary Fund, 2020).

⁶ See Jevans Nyabiage, "China's Trade with Africa Grows 2.2 percent in 2019 to US\$208 Billion," *South China Morning Post*, January 18, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3046621/chinas-trade-africa-grows-22-cent-2019-us208-billion> (accessed July 9, 2020); Elliot Smith, "The US-China trade rivalry is Underway in Africa, and Washington is Playing Catch-Up" CNBC, October 9, 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/10/09/the-us-china-trade-rivalry-is-underway-in-africa.html> (accessed July 9, 2020).

⁷ Kartik Jayaram, Acha Leke, Amandla Ooko-Ombaka, and Ying Suny Sun, *Tackling COVID-19 in Africa: An Unfolding Health and Economic Crisis that Demands Bold Action* (McKinsey & Company, 2020).

⁸ IMF, *Regional Economic Outlook*.

⁹ Kartik Jayaram, Acha Leke, Amandla Ooko-Ombaka, and Ying Suny Sun, 8.

¹⁰ World Bank, "Remarks by World Bank Group President David Malpass on G20 Finance Ministers Conference Call on COVID-19," March 23, 2020, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/speech/2020/03/23/remarks-by-world-bank-group-president-david-malpass-on-g20-finance-ministers-conference-call-on-covid-19> (accessed August 7, 2020).

- ¹¹ Yun Sun, “China and Africa’s Debt: Yes to Relief, No to Blanket Forgiveness” *Brookings: Africa in Focus*, April 20, 2020, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2020/04/20/china-and-africas-debt-yes-to-relief-no-to-blanket-forgiveness/?utm_campaign=Africa%20Growth%20Initiative&utm_source=hs_email&utm_medium=email&utm_content=87591010 (accessed July 11, 2020).
- ¹² “G-20 Agrees to Support Debt Relief for Poor Nations” *Kyodo News*, April 16, 2020, <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2020/04/b4d644947bd6-update2-g-20-agrees-to-support-debt-relief-for-poor-nations.html?phrase=postwords=&words=> (accessed August 7, 2020).
- ¹³ “Coronavirus Pandemic Helps China Expand Its Influence in Africa” *Deutsche Welle*, April 25, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/coronavirus-pandemic-helps-china-expand-its-influence-in-africa/a-53241294> (accessed July 10, 2020).
- ¹⁴ For a link between Chinese foreign assistance and African democratic development, see Steve Hess and Richard Aidoo, “Democratic Backsliding in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Role of China’s Development Assistance,” *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, Vol. 57, no. 4 (October 2019): 421–444.
- ¹⁵ Richard Aidoo, “African Countries Have Started to Push Back against Chinese Development Aid. Here’s Why,” *The Washington Post*, October 16, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/10/16/african-countries-have-started-to-push-back-against-chinese-development-aid-heres-why/> (accessed September 4, 2020).
- ¹⁶ Salem Solomon, “Coronavirus Brings ‘Sinophobia’ to Africa,” *Voice of America*, March 4, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/science-health/coronavirus-outbreak/coronavirus-brings-sinophobia-africa> (accessed July 12, 2020).
- ¹⁷ For a detailed exposition on China’s noninterference doctrine and its application in Africa, see Richard Aidoo and Steve Hess, “Non-Interference 2.0: China’s Evolving Foreign Policy towards a Changing Africa,” *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 44, no. 1 (2015): 107–139; Steve Hess and Richard Aidoo, “Beyond the Rhetoric: Noninterference in China’s African Policy,” *African and Asian Studies* 9, no. 3 (2010): 356–383.
- ¹⁸ See Steve Hess and Richard Aidoo, “Beyond the Rhetoric”; Stephen Chan (ed.), *The Morality of China in Africa: The Middle Kingdom and the Dark Continent* (New York: Zed Books Ltd, 2013).
- ¹⁹ Read about the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) from its webpage at <https://www.focac.org/eng/> (accessed July 13, 2020).
- ²⁰ Irene Yuan Sun, Kartik Jayaram, and Omid Kassiri, *Dance of the Lions and Dragons: How Are Africa and China Engaging, and How Will the Partnership Evolve?* (San Francisco: McKinsey Global Institute, 2017).
- ²¹ See, for instance, Howard French, *China’s Second Continent: How a Million Migrants Are Building a New Empire in Africa* (New York: Knopf, 2014).
- ²² Aubrey Hruby, “Dispelling the Dominant Myths of China in Africa,” *Atlantic Council*, September 3, 2018, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/dispelling-the-dominant-myths-of-china-in-africa> (accessed July, 3, 2020).

²³ Kwasi Gyamfi Asiedu, “China Wants to Help Africa Fight Coronavirus but Not Everyone Is Welcoming,” *Quartz Africa*, April 8, 2020, <https://qz.com/africa/1834670/chinese-medical-aid-for-covid-19-in-africa-gets-mixed-support/> (accessed July 13, 2020).

²⁴ Deborah Brautigam, “A Critical Look at Chinese ‘Debt-Trap Diplomacy’: The Rise of a Meme,” *Area Development and Policy*, 5, no. 1 (2020): 1–14.

²⁵ See “The New Scramble for Africa,” *Al Jazeera*, July 27, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_KM06hTeRSY (accessed August 6, 2020); see also “China’s African Gold Rush,” *Al Jazeera*, December 15, 2016, <https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/101east/2016/12/china-african-gold-rush-161213120529920.html> (accessed August 6, 2020).