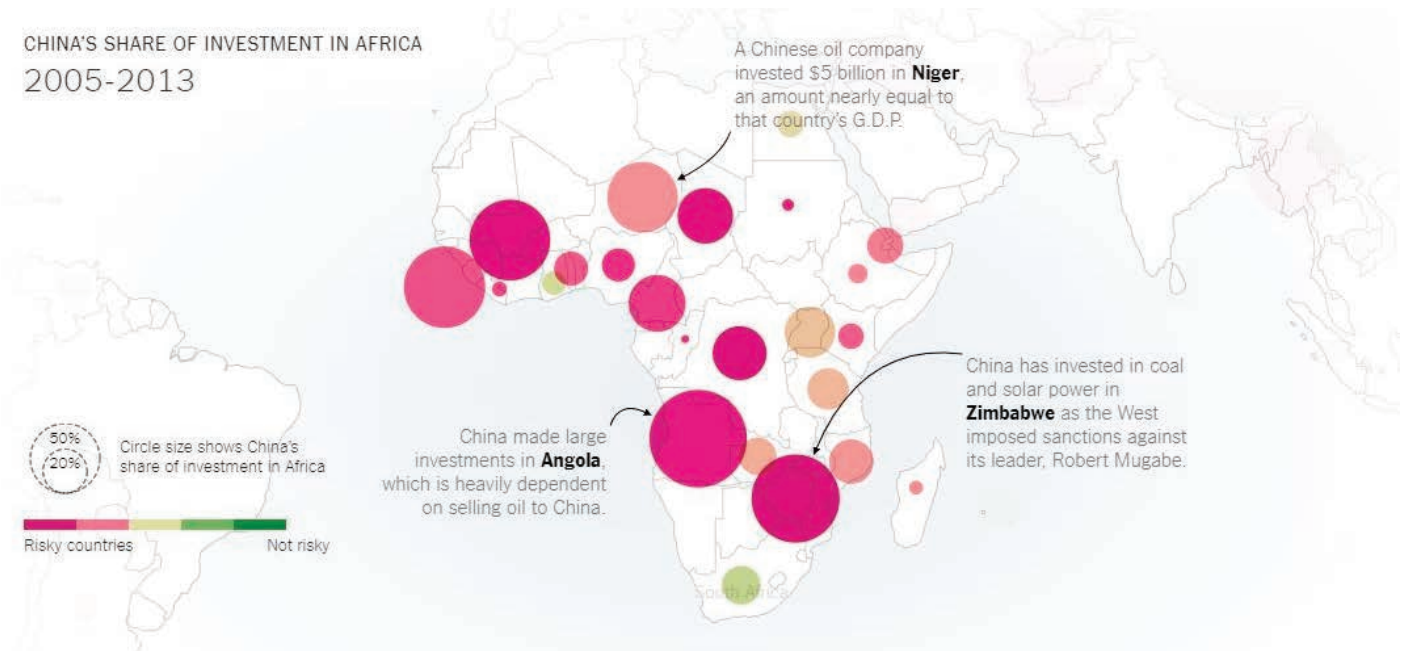


## *China in Africa: Essential Questions and Teaching Resource Suggestions*

### *By Ian Tiedemann*

**Editor's note:** Please see the recommended resources for links to all websites mentioned in this essay.

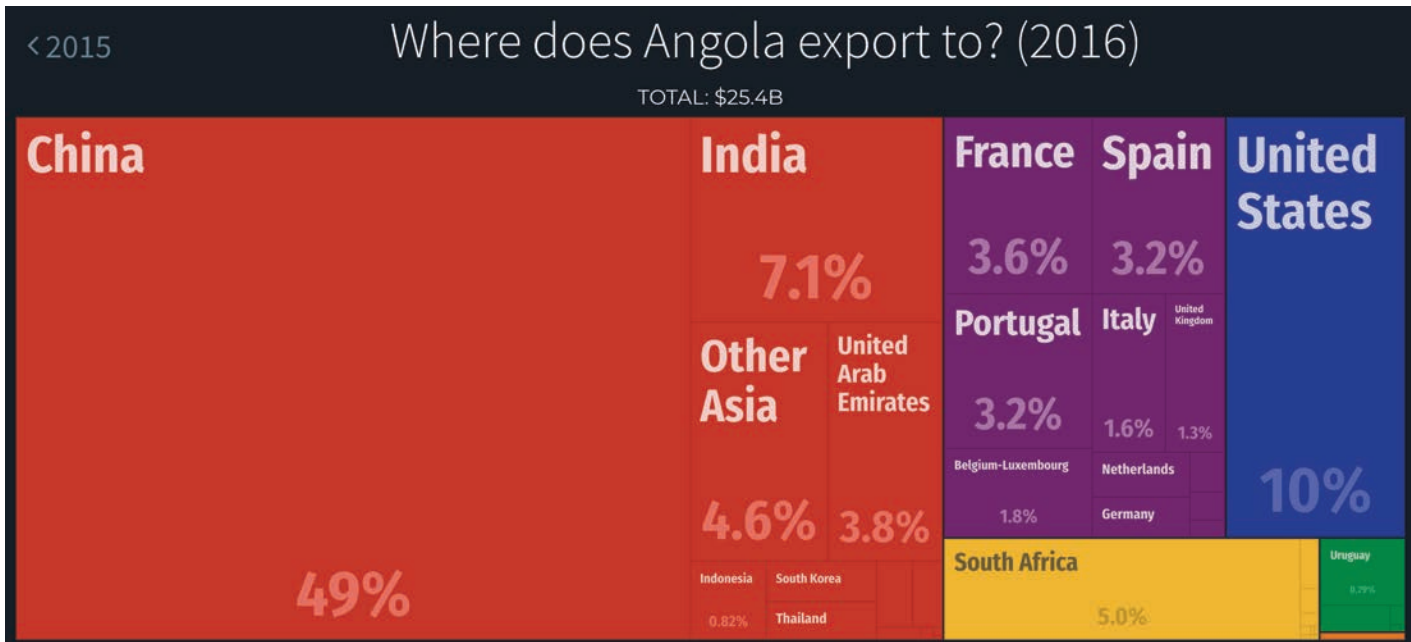
Around the world, nations in desperate need of infrastructure are finding a willing partner in China, whose Belt and Road Initiative offers the potential for transformative benefits. For sub-Saharan African countries, the construction of a cross-continental road/rail from Dakar to Djibouti promises economic development, as goods, services, and people find reliable transportation to markets. This project, which will cross ten countries, is only part of China's growing footprint in Africa, where Chinese investments are also building energy capacity, port access, hospitals, and schools. Still, the extent to which Chinese investments in Africa represent a "win-win" for both sides remains a controversial and important issue for students to understand from various historical and contemporary lenses. This resource essay considers several key questions and issues, and offers resources to address this important subject in the high school classroom.



Source: Gregor Aisch, Josh Keller, and K. K. Rebecca Lai, "The World According to China," *The New York Times*, July 24, 2015, <https://tinyurl.com/y8lagh5e>.

To begin, how did we get to a point that China has become a main investor in the African continent? For perspective, teachers may show students the *GapMinder World* interactive visual that compares global per capita income and life expectancy. A quick movement toward the 1800s and one can see that China and sub-Saharan African countries were in relatively similar levels of development (and even shared experiences with colonialism). Starting in the 1970s, however, the large red bubble representing China moves dramatically upward and to the right of the chart; while all nations have exhibited growth in these indicators over the last forty years, China outpaces the rest of the world, while sub-Saharan African countries remain toward the left and bottom of the chart. This brief exercise should prompt questions about how and why China advanced economically while its current trade partners did not keep pace.

Several interactive resources will help students gain a deeper understanding of what China and sub-Saharan African countries produce and trade, and the areas/industries in which China is most invested. By viewing MIT's *Observatory of Economic Complexity*, a student can see a nation's main exports and imports, and the industries these represent; a deeper search also shows trade partners for each good. While African nations are a relatively minor portion of China's import/export destinations (China sends many goods to many places), China is often one of Africa's biggest



Source: OEC: The Observatory of Economic Complexity, <https://tinyurl.com/y86nmrrg>.

trade partners. You can also see how economies have advanced and how these relationships may change over time by viewing different years of data. To view a general overview of Chinese investments by region and/or country, students can view *The American Enterprise Institute's* “China Global Investment Tracker” and *The New York Times's* interactive “The World According to China.” Both interactive resources will help students get started with their research.

Once students comprehend the relative economic status of the trade partners, they should consider the inherent costs and benefits of Chinese investments on the continent. Several excellent sources provide background context for teachers and students. *The New York Times Magazine's* “Is China the World’s New Colonial Power?” reviews the historical relationship between the trade partners and highlights areas of interest concerning infrastructure projects and Chinese–African cultural connections. The question of whether Chinese investments resemble a form of colonialism is worth asking, especially in sub-Saharan Africa; students should consider historical parallels, like China’s heavy emphasis on resources, and differences, such as the potential long-term infrastructure benefits for African nations. Moreover, students should examine China’s involvement in the political system of the countries in which it invests. Are the investments equally helpful to the government and the nation’s citizens? Will greater economic development lead to stability and recognition of human rights? Are these investments a true kickstart for growth or a debt trap that will keep African nations under Chinese influence? Other broad overviews of the topic have been presented by the Council on Foreign Relations, the China–Africa Research Initiative (Johns Hopkins), *The Diplomat's* “China-Africa Relations” page, and the China–Africa Project’s ongoing podcast series.

Howard French contributes to the conversation through his book, *China’s Second Continent: How a Million Migrants Are Building a New Empire in Africa*, and a feature article in *The Atlantic*, “The Next Empire.” French’s journalism is accessible to students and paints a complex profile of Chinese investments. In addition to Chinese companies (some state-run, some not), individual Chinese migrants also see Africa as an investment opportunity. Migrants face challenges of learning a new land and culture as they navigate local political and economic realities; they also may face prejudice depending on their areas of settlement and the goods/services they trade. Their tales bring a more human element to the story; just as industrious Chinese citizens once moved from farm to factory, they now take the risk of moving to a faraway continent. Bram Van Paesschen’s documentary *Empire of Dust* takes a ground-level view of Chinese–African interactions in the Democratic Republic of Congo. By putting a face on these interactions, students may better understand the daily challenges that both Chinese and African sides must overcome to build a working relationship.

Finally, students should consider whether Chinese investments are a direct challenge to America’s foreign policy interests. On one hand, a more developed African continent is beneficial to the entire global community, but does growing Chinese influence pose a concern to American access to resources and markets, and our underlying support for democratic

institutions? *The Foreign Policy Association's* “China in Africa: Feeding the Dragon” considers these questions, as does the Wilson Center in a “New Era of US–China Competition.” Can Chinese and US interests coexist on the African continent, or will geopolitical influences in this area resemble a new Cold War?

Ultimately, the issues and questions presented in this brief description of curriculum resources represent a critical juncture for China, sub-Saharan Africa, and our students. Whether the growing connections between these societies will be mutually beneficial is extremely difficult to determine; such intellectual exercises are perfect opportunities for students to flex their analytical muscles and gain context on a topic that will inevitably change the world around them.

## Recommended Resources

“*Gapminder Tools*,” *Gapminder: Unveiling the Beauty of Statistics for a Fact Based World View*, <https://tinyurl.com/y7vy4mn3>.

*OECD: The Observatory of Economic Complexity*, <https://atlas.media.mit.edu/en/>.

“China Global Investment Tracker,” *The American Enterprise Institute*, <https://tinyurl.com/y77recss>.

Gregor Aisch, Josh Keller, and K. K. Rebecca Lai. “The World According to China.” *The New York Times*. July 24, 2015. <https://tinyurl.com/y8lagh5e>.

Brook Larmer, “Is China the World’s New Colonial Power?” *The New York Times*. May 2, 2017. <https://tinyurl.com/kt7ngt3>.

“China in Africa,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, <https://www.cfr.org/backgroundunder/china-africa>.

*China Africa Research Initiative*, <http://www.sais-cari.org/>.

*The China Africa Project*, <https://chinaafricaproject.com/>.

“China-Africa Relations,” *The Diplomat*, <https://tinyurl.com/y8rxrftt>.

Howard W. French, *Chinas Second Continent: How a Million Migrants Are Building a New Empire in Africa* (New York: Vintage Books, 2015).

Howard W. French, “The Next Empire,” *The Atlantic*, May 2010, <https://tinyurl.com/y9xntxff>.

Daniel James Scott, “Director Bram Van Paesschen on Empire of Dust,” *Filmmaker Magazine*, December 4, 2011, <https://tinyurl.com/y8m8k7ga>.

“China in Africa,” *The Foreign Policy Association*, <https://tinyurl.com/y8q4zs7w>.

Abraham Denmark, “A New Era of Intensified US–China Competition,” *Wilson Center*, January 4, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/yd7xt8w2>.



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