

Theirry Bangui – *China, A New Partner for Africa’s Development: Are We Heading for the End of European Privileges on the Black Continent?*

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Most of the discourse on China-Africa relations (like that of many academic fields) has tended to be Western-dominated, and has paid relatively little attention to Chinese and African opinions. Theirry Bangui’s *China, A New Partner for Africa’s Development: Are We Heading for the End of European Privileges on the Black Continent?* would like to redress this imbalance and provide an African voice in the discussion. It seeks to answer four questions: “Are [critical Western opinions of China’s engagement with Africa] justified? Are they shared by the African people? Is the growing Chinese presence an opportunity for the continent? What is the role of the West and especially of Europe in Africa today?” While it is not always clear that there is a definitive answer to these questions and others asked throughout the book, this volume does open a conversation about these important questions, and attempts to give a different perspective than that which has dominated the media over the last decade or so. Bangui’s standpoint is atypical in the body of Sino-African literature as it comes from his stance as a non-academic in this field, but perhaps represents a more-popular view.

The book, which is divided into three parts, starts out with a discussion of the nature and increase in the level of China-Africa interactions, including trade and infrastructure, and the viability of China as an alternative to Africa’s more-traditional Western partners. This is followed by a very brief description of the FOCAC action-plans and those of other meetings African countries have had with other emerging partners, and of the “grey areas” in Chinese-African

cooperation, including conflicts between Chinese employers and African workers. There is also a chapter in which the author disagrees with Western criticisms on the issues for which China is most-often censured for not protecting and even worsening: good governance, environmental concerns and human rights, and the blame for these problems is portioned to ex-colonial powers too. The second part of the book, which is concerned with Africa-EU relations, first gives a short historical overview of them, and then a portrayal of European reactions to emerging actors in Africa. Afterwards, there is a chapter about selected European dealings in Africa (with a particular emphasis on those of France), and subsequently the final part of the book begins with some remarks on the growing potential and economies of African countries and regions, and, after that, a mention of some of the impediments to African development.

There is a growing trend in discussions on the Sino-African relationship to recognise that African agency, although often significant in directing the interactions themselves, frequently does not play a part in current IR interpretations of them. This book strongly emphasises the need for this recognition, and also the need for African agency to play a bigger part in managing future relations. There are some sweeping overgeneralisations in the book, and also an inclination in places to make statements without supporting data or concrete examples. However, other parts of the volume contain ample quotes and interviews, which help to personalise the text and offer many concrete examples as illustrations in those sections.

China, A New Partner for Africa's Development accuses the usual China-Africa popular commentary of being overly critical, unbalanced, and too Euro- or Western-centric. However, by attempting to mitigate this, it then falls into the same trap and makes a similar mistake. In places the book is too *uncritical* of

Chinese engagements in Africa and uses the approach of pointing out that ‘the West used to do it too’, which distracts from the criticism but, it could be argued, fails to actually answer it. For example, the book praises the Chinese for being hard workers who do manual labour working in 12-hour shifts, but does not mention any human rights concerns in this regard, and notes that the Chinese do not have a monopoly on underpaying African workers, but does not discuss whether this exacerbates problems like fewer human rights- and employee-protections and easily-exploited workforces in some African countries.

Bangui begins the book by differentiating geopolitics from ‘geo-strategy’, opting to use the latter and defining it as “the implementation of operational tools to serve a great purpose of international or military policy. It is a method of political action in space, a study of power relations between powers, from all geographic angles” (xvi), but then does not appear to return to a discussion of this (or any other) theoretical position again. This volume, whose tone might be described as non-academic in places, is also somewhat out of date; for example it does not include South Africa’s entry into the BRICS countries which would be relevant in a discussion about emerging actors in Africa, does not seem aware of China’s own 2011 accounts of it having prioritised Africa over all other regions to which to donate its foreign aid funds since 2009, and it vastly overestimates the amount of Chinese aid, which according to the most recent and comprehensive data available now is much smaller than was previously thought.

While it offers an important viewpoint on the Sino-African debate, having been written by an African from what Thierry Bangui asserts is “an African perspective” on China’s interactions with Africa, when too often the loudest voices in the commentary have been Western ones, *China, A New Partner for Africa’s Development*’s contribution to the academic discipline of Sino-African

relations is unclear. The book is more likely to appeal to the general public than to Sino-African scholars, especially those members of the public who would like to read a more-contentious view of this increasingly-important relationship.