

Deborah Brautigam, *The Dragon's Gift: The Real Story of China in Africa*, Oxford University Press 2009, xv+397 pp.

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The subtitle with the words “the real story” may seem a bit journalistic for a book so seriously researched, so full of data and calculations of amounts of loans, investments, interests, etc. Although the style used in the text mixes descriptions of settings of interviews with an abundance of characters so as to make the reading more pleasant, it is not always easy to follow the main lines of the author’s arguments. For sure, D. Brautigam, an expert on relations between China and Africa, wants to destroy myths and redress views that cast China in the role of a predator. But she certainly is not naïve. Not everything goes smoothly when China does business with Africa. Actually, it should be better said “African countries”, each seemingly with its own characteristics. However, the declarations of Chinese leaders oftentimes give the impression that they speak about Africa globally.

One thing that the author does not shy away from telling the reader is that the Western approach to Africa, pretending to help an economic take-off, is not that stainless or consistent. The traditional donor countries had dubious motives and their promises have not always materialized. As for China now it is common knowledge that it needs raw materials; it must also prove that it is a responsible power on the international scene. Actually China is already engaged as a diplomatic and effective actor in many troubled places on the continent, and not only because it is competing with Taiwan.

Brautigam admits that data are not easy to collect, are probably not totally reliable, because of China’s policy and special rules or devices to adapt to international practice while keeping its own secrets. The book is full of examples, taken from the past as well as the present and very interesting excerpts of interviews with Chinese diplomats, financial decision-makers, and managers in Africa.

The first lines of the conclusion (p.307) summarize what the author, after many years of careful observation, thinks of decades of China’s economic as well as political relations in Africa. . She does not believe that China is a “rogue donor”, but she adds that China’s rise in the African continent is a cause for some concern... “Chinese aid and engagement are misinformed, the alarm out of proportion.” Actually, China’s export credits are larger than its aid, and are not risk-free. She insists that what China is doing in Africa is the result of its own experience when the country decided to do business with Japan and other countries under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping. So China links business and aid “in innovative ways,” she says.

Now China has become a powerful force in the other continent and intends to stay. Admitting this fact should push Western countries and Japan to promote China as an ever more responsible stakeholder in the continent...and face their own shortcomings in their promised aid to poor countries. So the book is about China presence in Africa, with positive and negative aspects.

Ethiopia is cited an example of a success story. After the first steps of Chinese manufacturers in the leather industry in that country fear began to spread that they would actually steal the market. But the opposite happened; Ethiopia’s shoes sector blossomed not so long after. Mauritius’ export-zones is also often cited as another success story. .

But Sierra-Leone, among other countries frequently visited by the author, is surely quite a different story, as well as South-Africa and Sudan. Comparison helps for an overall view; this is not a defect of the book...on the contrary, it indicates that the diverse faces of Africa should also be taken into account, as it is to a certain extent by the author. Real concerns here and there remain despite success elsewhere.

This means different practical solutions should be worked out for similar issues, like the number of Chinese versus local workers in a project. Brautigam says African governments are the ones in control of the issue of Chinese labor in their countries. (p.157) Also, some political deadlines or

internal issues in a country are motivations for pushing completion of projects or propose a deal. But all these are the African side of the programs.

But “[u]ltimately”, she writes, “it is up to African governments to shape the encounter with China.” (p.311) Many pages describe reactions of Africans working for or with Chinese companies. Not always pleasant to hear. Why? Official reports from the World Bank, the IMF or other such agencies as well as directives from foreign governments in the policy of aid give instructions to the recipients. It is not always clear what the real purpose of the lessons is.

Why cannot African countries do better to alleviate their own poverty? Is it only the fault of the donor? Many examples given by Brautigam show that the countries helped had to recall Chinese managers and engineers to make a project work after a few years following completion. The Chinese government has promised trainings of Africans for various ventures. It seems genuinely interested in doing business with African countries and knows that it needs partners. Long term involvement in the continent is part of a reasonable strategy.

Again, how do African governments and peoples understand this invitation to partnership? How much can they do to help themselves, as China has done when reform and opening-up policy became the lever of its economic-plus-business negotiations with foreigners, supported by a strong central government, and an authoritarian policy more or less accepted by the people. The model, which has helped millions of Chinese to rise above the poverty level(though also with side-effects, such as pollution and a high Gini coefficient), is being proposed for African countries without it being imposed. But it is not sure that it will succeed. Maybe other factors should enter the formula.

Although China is relieved of many sensational but ill-founded critics, at the end of the book no one actor emerges as a magnanimous hero. Much experimentation remains to be innovatively and prudently carried out. Africans could be encouraged to be even more decided partners and responsible stakeholders. Brautigam, who knows Africa so well, may have something to say about that matter too.

Perhaps because the endnotes are already full of references the book has a useful index but no bibliography.. Nevertheless, another of Brautigam research papers should be added to it. It appeared the same year that this book came out in The China Quarterly Special Issues, New Series No 9, entitled *China and Africa : Emerging Patterns in Globalization and Development*, edited by Julia C. Strauss and Martha Saavedra. The paper of Brautigam, cosigned with Tang Xiaoyang, is on China’s presence and investment in African agriculture. In the same issue, are at least two articles addressing some of the questions raised above, which were not directly the subject matter of *The Dragon’s Gift*. One chapter, by G. Dobler, describes “the formation of a Chinese expatriate community in Namibia” (pp.157-177); another one, by B. Sautman and Yan Hairong, focuses on “the African perspective on China-Africa links” (pp.178-209). Obviously, the real story of Chinese in Africa has still many chapters to be written.