

**Making Sense of the China-Africa Relationship:  
Theoretical Approaches and the Politics of Knowledge**

18-19 November 2013

Yale University, New Haven

**Background**

The twenty-first century has witnessed China's emergence as Africa's largest trading partner, with two-way trade reaching over \$166 billion in 2011. Chinese policy banks are now major sources of finance for African governments, and Chinese companies are investing in Africa's natural resources, infrastructure, manufacturing, and agriculture. An estimated 1 million Chinese citizens are now working and living in Africa,<sup>1</sup> while an estimated 10,000 African traders are currently working in the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, China has emerged as the leading contributor to UN peacekeeping personnel of any of the five permanent members of the Security Council, with most Chinese blue helmets located in Africa. These empirical realities have been matched over the last few years by the emergence of a small cottage industry of books on Africa's new relationship with China, as well as a growing number of graduate students across disciplinary fields who choose to write doctoral dissertations on some aspect of the China-Africa relationship. In addition to a growing body of literature, this large volume of scholarly and research activity includes countless academic conferences, think-tank seminars and discussions, trans-regional research collaborations, research institutes and research blogs.

Despite the vast amount of research being produced in recent years on the China-Africa relationship, this remains largely empirical and under-theorized. A preliminary mapping study of China-Africa research and knowledge networks undertaken by the SSRC in January 2012<sup>3</sup> identified three general trends and recurring themes in both academic and policy research activities around China and Africa: 1) The impact of Chinese economic engagement in Africa, especially in the resource sector but also large-scale infrastructure projects, on the economic development of African states; 2) China's interaction with African security, including both its growing involvement in international peace operations, as well as the impact of Chinese economic interests on ongoing and emerging conflicts in the region; and 3) Historic as well as more recent migration patterns, their resulting diasporas, including both African migrant labor communities in China and Chinese in Africa, and

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<sup>1</sup>"China's Xi arrives in Africa with focus on trade ties," Reuters, accessed on 26 March 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/03/24/china-africa-idUSL5N0CG0KV20130324>

<sup>2</sup>"In Southern China, A Thriving African Neighborhood", NPR, accessed on 26 March 2013, <http://m.npr.org/story/151300553>. According to many observers, this is a conservative estimate.

<sup>3</sup>Tatiana Carayannis and Nathaniel Olin, *A Preliminary Mapping of China-Africa Knowledge Networks*, New York: Social Science Research Council, January 2012.  
Social Science Research Council

questions of identity. However, the research agenda has been dominated by the growing economic linkages and ties between China and Africa, and the leaps and bounds made by the Chinese economy in the last decade, largely without the large-scale development aid flowing from the West that Africa has enjoyed. This has contributed to a vibrant debate among development economists about the so-called Beijing Consensus or Beijing model for development.

As the volume of scholarly and public policy work on the intersections between Africa and China reaches a critical mass, there is now both a window of opportunity and an urgent need to provide the rigorous theoretical groundwork for future research and teaching for the next generation of scholars, and to strengthen cross-regional research collaborations. With this goal in mind, this conference will bring together a small number of leading scholars and some graduate students from China, Africa, North America and Europe to explore questions about the production of knowledge and the theoretical underpinnings of this work—specifically, how this knowledge is produced, for whom, and how; and how to connect this empirical work to broader bodies of theoretical knowledge. It is anticipated that it will lead to an edited book on the same.

The conference will consist of five sessions, two on conceptual and theoretical questions, and three where researchers will be asked to give short presentations of their current empirical research. The conference is intended to be highly interactive. Thus, presenters will be asked to prepare short “think pieces” that attempt to answer the discussion questions within the context of their own work and be prepared for discussion of other presentations as well. Think pieces will be later developed for publication. Chaired discussion sessions will follow each panel where discussants will be asked to give comments on the presentations and questions from the audience will be encouraged.

We also ask conference participants to circulate this concept note to interested graduate students who may wish to participate. We are particularly interested in including students engaged in novel “China-Africa” research and having them share both their substantive findings and their experience and ideas about the process of producing knowledge and how it can be improved. Graduate student paper proposals will be reviewed and selected on a competitive and regional basis. We ask that these proposals include full contact information and are limited to 2 pages. These should be sent by 4 October 2013 to [Aucoin@ssrc.org](mailto:Aucoin@ssrc.org).

## **Organizers**

### *Conference Planning Committee*

Tatiana Carayannis, SSRC  
Mamadou Diouf, Columbia University  
Ron Kassimir, SSRC  
Jackie Klopp, Columbia University

Yoon Park, Chinese in Africa/Africans in China Research Network  
Christopher Udry, Yale University

This conference is organized in collaboration with the Council on African Studies at Yale University and The China-Africa Project, a new initiative at the Social Science Research Council, designed to deepen understanding of China's new engagement with the African region by situating emergent scholarship on China and Africa within broader scholarly and policy discourses about ongoing global transformations. Launched in collaboration with the Chinese in Africa/Africans in China Research Network, this project aims to strengthen existing research networks and widen their reach through a series of web-based activities; and facilitate new collaborations. While the China-Africa relationship will continue to be of key interest, the SSRC will also use this initial two-year focus on China-Africa as a model for understanding the wider range of interactions between China (and other parts of Asia) and the "global South," and to explore new narratives and relationships in a changing global order. This program reflects two central components of the SSRC mission--bringing social science knowledge and thinking to bear on important global issues, and catalyzing innovation in social science research through interdisciplinary and comparative, cross-regional intellectual encounters.