

How China's "Trade Not Aid" Strategy Became Construed As Charitable Help : Deconstructing the "Touching" Idyll of Li Li's Investment in Africa

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Résumé

Comment la stratégie chinoise, "commerce et non pas assistantat", se transforme en un acte de charité.

Ces dernières années, la Chine a accru ses investissements en Afrique et son modèle "Trade not Aid" semble être la meilleure prestation de l'assistance durable. En passant en revue l'histoire de l'aide chinoise à l'Afrique, en examinant les relations interraciales, et en déconstruisant les modèles contemporains de l'aide, l'auteur fait valoir que, du moins en termes de tentatives agricoles, l'approche actuelle de la Chine ressemble à du colonialisme.

Abstract

In recent years, China has increased investments in Africa and its "Trade Not Aid" model appears to be the best delivery of sustainable assistance. By reviewing the history of Chinese aid to Africa, examining race-relations literature, and deconstructing contemporary models of aid, the author argues that, at least in terms of agricultural endeavors, China's current approach resembles the colonialism that it once sought to disassemble.

There have been many arguments against traditional patterns of aid to Africa. In 2009, Dambisa Moyo provided one of the most recent and prominent rationales, asserting that trade-based economic relationships encourage investment, production, as well as technical knowledge exchange, which therefore provides the effectiveness and sustainability that are lacking in traditional aid projects.¹ This "Trade Not Aid" approach has become synonymous with contemporary China-Africa economic relations, and as it enhances its investments in Africa, China is also winning Moyo's praise as Africa's best friend.² Nonetheless, a closer inspection of their relationship reveals that, at least in terms of agricultural investment, China's strategy is not as radical of a departure from colonialism as the existing literature would suggest.

This paper takes Li Li's Jonken Farm situated in Moyo's home — Zambia — as a case study to explore the dichotomy between perceptions of aid providers and recipients. Li and her husband Wang Chi built Jonken Farm in 1992. Their story first became known in a 2004 television interview,³ and after

Li assumed the management of the 3573-hectare farm when Wang passed away in 2005, she became a national celebrity in China. Beijing crowned Li with titles such as "the Chinese who touches Africa the most", "National Heroine", and "Distinguished Communist." She was also mentioned in two important English-language publications on the Sino-African relationship. Basing herself on Jonken, Deborah Brautigam concludes that Li's private investment generates profit as well as employment opportunities for locals.⁴ Serge Michel and Michel Beuret add that trade-based relationships buffer interracial discontent in ways aid does not; despite recent anti-Chinese revolts in Zambia, they find that Jonken is described as "a perfect example of the cooperation between China and Zambia"⁵.

I deconstruct the Jonken story in the context of Beijing's agricultural endeavors in Africa since 1960. Chinese assistance to Africa began with altruistic roots, but these have been lost over time even though Chinese media frames investments as "help" to its former aid recipients so it appears that China has not discontinued any aid. While Chinese perceive the contemporary business relationships as assistance, however, "aid" recipients often do not; while Beijing paints Li as a national hero, Zambians find her a bigoted and harsh. Despite investments being more efficient than traditional forms of aid, the racism that has accompanied the capitalism foretells grave risks in the future of Sino-African relations.

Altruism

Origins of Chinese Agricultural Aid to Africa

When the People's Republic of China (PRC) was established, its communist outlook viewed commercial activities as acts of capitalist and colonialist oppression. The PRC consequently sought to bring class cooperation onto the international stage. Prior to 1949, Chinese workers were paid to work with Africans to plant cash crops for colonialists, who made their fortunes exploiting these laborers. In this way, capitalism and colonialism oppressed both Chinese and Africans, and thus set the foundation for dialogue between Communist China and Africa.

The PRC joined the race to aid Africa around 1960. Due to pressures from Moscow, Washington, and the un-surrendering Republic of China on Taiwan (hereafter "ROC" or "Taiwan"), Beijing had to give aid generously to newly independent African states in exchange for international support. The "mutual benefit" principle of which Zhou Enlai spoke in 1963 guided the Sino-Africa relationship⁶ for many years and can be understood as a framework wherein China traded economic resources for political gains.

Among the economic benefits China delivered to Africa, agricultural aid was the most critical for Africa's long-term development. The colonialist cash-crop strategy crippled sub-Saharan Africa by making it "produce what it does not consume [...] and consume what it does not produce."⁷ Dependence on imported food was therefore not only a vestige of colonialism, but a barrier to independence for many African states. A steady domestic food supply and development thus went hand-in-hand: Africa would not make sufficient progress until it ameliorated its agricultural productivity

because “the attainment of food security is at the very core of the quest for sustainable development on the African continent”⁸. China therefore prioritized agricultural aid to Africa for this was the way to assist African aid recipients in combating class inequalities.

Genuine Help and Appreciation

Chinese endeavors to improve Africa's food supply were first demonstrated on large farms and research centers for the promotion of agricultural techniques. Although both were designed to enhance food production, building large farms required heavy infrastructural investments, involved more qualified technicians, and benefitted more local people financially and technically. Since 1959, China has dispatched roughly 10,000 technicians to help convert 70,000 hectares of wasteland into farmland. This feat, which included 16 irrigation projects comprising dams, reservoirs, ditches, and pump stations, was essentially completed by the late 1970s. This wasteland transformation was highly impressive and furthered the PRC's class solidarity mission for “large farms established with Chinese aid played a crucial role in solving local grain shortages and advancing local economies.”⁹

In addition to food, large farms also generated skilled peasants and plentiful harvests, and the associated land exploration and infrastructure-building augmented employment rates. Since large farms produced significant visual and economic results, they attracted politicians' praise for Chinese food supply solutions and confirmed the strength of the Sino-African friendship. Locals, too, were seen to be grateful: reports recount stories of African peasants praising the Chinese through song and dance, with some even kneeling before Chinese-constructed buildings to thank the Chinese for saving their lives.¹⁰

Unfortunately, most of these projects were unsustainable because once these projects were transferred to locals, cultural, political, or social barriers caused the majority to deteriorate substantially. For example, the Afefi Project in Ghana was a 900-hectare rice project that included a delicate irrigation system and a reservoir. When Chinese technicians left, without continual financial and technical support, the farm reverted to its traditional slash-and-burn cultivation method which yields far fewer crops.¹¹

Although such efficiency problems existed, Beijing's attitude was surprisingly unselfish. Chinese assistance during the early period was marked by altruism, a common sentiment amongst the Chinese who worked in Africa. Chinese technicians paid their own living expenses because anything less was not philanthropic. After seeing that the Liberian economy depended on exporting primary resources, a Chinese diplomat to Liberia sighed with emotion and asked, “If all money flows to foreigners, how can Liberians gain real independence and enjoy a decent quality of life?”¹² A former Chinese ambassador to Mali remembered that Malians love tea, so Chinese technicians were dispatched to teach them how to plant tea even though helping the Malian economy meant that China would lose its export market.¹³

The technicians' sentiments and efforts did not go unnoticed by aid recipients. PRC diplomats recall that Chinese were respected everywhere. During the Ugandan civil war, for instance, detained PRC diplomats were

unable to communicate with the militia in their local dialect, but as soon as they mentioned Kibimba, a 600-hectre PRC-assisted farm, the militia immediately "switched to a smile and released [the diplomats]."¹⁴

Political and Economic Benefits

Although agricultural aid was economically inefficient, Mao's political ideals of Communism and international altruism prevailed in the PRC's assistance strategy. In many aspects of agricultural assistance, China prioritized aid recipients' interests by helping ease host governments' financial burdens and dedicating itself to dismantling the vestiges of colonial dependence. Labor and capital investments in large farms and lucrative harvests for locals demonstrated China's heartfelt efforts and therefore consolidated political alliances and friendships.

Aid recipients also reaped some lasting economic gain. For starters, not all Chinese assisted farms reverted to nothing. A few remained functional, though less lucrative than they once were. For instance, Brautigam found a 56-hectre farm in Sierra Leone's Lambayama that the PRC created 30 years ago that still reaps two harvests a year. Aside from supporting 150 peasants, this farm helped many refugees during the civil war. The local agricultural office still "appreciate[s] this kind of technical assistance [because] this area was developed long ago, and we are still benefiting."¹⁵ In addition to directly helping peasants through infrastructural development, Chinese aid made conditions more attractive to private investments. The above-mentioned Kibimba project suffered great losses after the local government took over, but the Chinese-laid infrastructure attracted a British company that replaced the management and allowed this farm to produce enough rice to market.¹⁶ Although there are many criticisms of aid efficiency prior to the 1980s, some scholars argue that "[o]f all the fields involving Sino-African technical cooperation, the best results have been seen in agriculture."¹⁷

The Evolution of China's Aid to Africa

In the 1980s, capitalism replaced Mao's strict communism when the PRC internally adopted a capitalist approach to economic development. The main reason for downsizing assistance projects was not poor efficiency but China's domestic financial needs. When Zhao Ziyang reiterated the "mutual benefit" principle in 1982, he implied that China now required more financial returns and therefore included an economic connotation to Zhou Enlai's 1963 definition of "mutual benefit".

The stabilizing of the PRC's international status was another reason for the PRC to change its conception of assistance. By the 1980s, Beijing's relationship with Moscow was less tense, Washington had recognized Beijing as the sole representation of China, and the PRC had been one of five permanent members of the UN Security Council for nearly a decade. The PRC could now "join decision-making in global politics, and thus acquire favorable conditions in the world market."¹⁸ China was eager to reduce its aid budget, but it could not simply terminate assistance for political considerations. It therefore resolved to diminish the scale of assistance but maintain

the existing number of projects, and thus the policy decision was taken to “switch from productive projects to monument building” as well as to “spend less and diversify”¹⁹

Architectural projects became the new trend in spite of aid recipients' preferences. “We are not interested in stadiums,”²⁰ summarized Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni, because monuments, such as conference centers, congressional buildings, and stadiums offer little economic productivity. Compared with agricultural assistance, however, construction projects are far more sustainable and recognizable from the aid provider's perspective. Erecting a building is a one-time expenditure that stands as an incontestable reminder of a major contribution. Due to the impressive political and visual effects of architectural infrastructure, numerous African states have consequently accepted these manifestations of China's friendship despite sentiments akin to Museveni's.

In addition to guaranteeing the sustainability and visibility of its contributions, construction projects offer China the bonus of reaping returns in subcontracts. Architectural projects allow Beijing to introduce Chinese construction-related companies into Africa through sub-contracting bids. Because Chinese bids are often the most affordable ones, they usually win the contract and such business relationships have garnered praise as a new type of Sino-African Cooperation. For example, many Chinese companies were introduced to Zaire through a \$12 million USD project for Mobutu Sese Seko's Presidential Villa. Zaire's ex-Prime Minister Kengo Wa Dondo welcomed Chinese companies because Chinese bidders would undercut other contenders and decrease his construction project spending. Chinese bids thus have a monetary effect “similar to aid” and have been considered a “new type of cooperation.”²¹

Unlike architectural projects, agricultural programs are mostly set in the countryside and are therefore accessible to general contractors. Without profits, Chinese aid focused on low-cost agricultural projects, and many costs were reapportioned to recipients. Housing, which PRC technicians once considered an aid provider's expenditure, became a required recipient state expense. Under the new “spend less and diversify” aid framework, China only financed light equipment, encouraged recipient states to send technicians to study agriculture in China, and prioritized “educational agricultural demonstration centers”²² without appearing to be giving any less assistance.

Such educational centers are less expensive to maintain than assistance farms and they imply the end of China's commitment to improve infrastructure for Africa's agriculture. These centers cost significantly less to maintain, but have the benefit of allowing Chinese officials to boast about the number of ongoing projects and reap the political effects. During the 1980s, China still offered agricultural assistance to more than 20 countries, but most of the 40 projects were small in scale and had few were capable of research or exploration.²³

Small agricultural centers naturally engender fewer economic benefits and in this way China's policy shift results in less effective agricultural assistance and a further departure from its original objective to eradicate vestiges of colonialism in Africa. Few sources, however, admit this decline

in productivity. For instance, since the 1980s, Chinese technicians in central Africa have been working on Mpoko and Boyali which the Chinese media has nicknamed "little Jiang-Nan" or "little Yangtze Delta," after China's historic rice granary. But, the real efficiency of these agricultural centers is far from what the media reports. Chinese experts have been teaching locals new technologies at Mpoko and Boyali for three decades but there has been little impact; peasants still prefer traditional slash-and-burn methods. An internal report to the Department of Agriculture of Guanxi Zhuang Autonomous Region conveys that these two centers "drift along, running themselves year after year at a very low standard."²⁴ Without large investments to overhaul the infrastructure, these two education-oriented farms have much fewer chances of surviving than large farms like the famed Kibimba which saved Chinese diplomats in Uganda.

The effects of China's overall ideological shift are most manifest in Sao Tome and Principe where China sent a Shanxi-based construction corporation to erect a congressional building in the late 1980s. Sao Tome and Principe terminated its relationship with China in 1997, but the congressional building still stands today and the Shanxi construction company continues to bid on local contracts. Apart from the edifice, locals remember China for the medical aid teams whose doctors once stole medicine from the Sao Tome and Principe state-funded hospital to sell on the side. Few know that after China adopted its "spend less and diversify" approach, China built a rice-planting technical center in Diogo Nunes, a highly-visible field located beside the international airport. Although Chinese diplomats praised the land's arability,²⁵ China found no market incentives to continue technical projects and closed the center after five years. Without significant investments in the form of machinery or an irrigation system, this 20-hectre farm and rice-husking plant soon reverted to an overgrown field.

The Chinese experience in Sao Tome and Principe illustrates how a project's size matters for political effect and that monetary returns motivate aid providers. Agricultural projects do not attract sustainable attention without being sizeable and profitable; without the budget or desire to invest heavily in potentially unsustainable low-visibility projects, China's altruistic aid objectives and agricultural assistance programs are historical bygones.

Supported by the media, unprofitable agricultural assistance continues to exist, but it is no longer a priority for them to be centers for sustainable agricultural technical knowledge exchanges. Despite Guinean President Lansana Conté's praise for the Chinese for transforming the "worn-out piece of land"²⁶ near his hometown into the Koba Farm, Guinean agricultural projects are steadily declining. China continues to build regional agricultural centers to educate locals on intensive farming techniques, but these centers are on the path to extinction. In 1992, China re-built an agricultural promotion center in Kindia and dispatched technicians to teach rice-planting, maize-planting, and mechanical maintenance skills to Guineans. Without follow-up assistance, the jungle reappropriated this center in 1999. Bafing-Tolo, an educational center worth \$1 million USD, was built in 1996 and ceased to function within the year.²⁷

Although initially reluctant to provide agricultural aid to Africa, China realized through the course of the 1990s that helping Africa could offer desi-

rable returns. The success of the Koba Farm is largely related to Chinese technicians being motivated by profit. Unlike “promotion centers,” Koba is run by a Chinese state-owned enterprise whose objective is to sell food in Guinea. Since 1997, Koba received 100 million RMB in investments and has received a number of experts wishing to explore this 1800-hectre farm. In addition to the monetary returns, Koba also renders political dividends. Conté undoubtedly praised Chinese investments in his hometown to consolidate his political support. China, too, reaps political clout from the publicity of Koba as an aid project. The Chinese media makes no mention that Koba is profit-oriented. Instead, this is a farm which “displays Chinese national spirit,” represents “Sino-Africa cooperation,” wins “locals’ respect,” provides 300 job opportunities worth \$20,000 USD, and “helps resolve Guinea’s food problem”.²⁸

Help Versus Aid

Small agricultural demonstration centers generate little economic or political return, while large farms risk being unfruitful long-term investments for any number of reasons.²⁹ As a solution, the Chinese reduced local influences to manual labor and left supervision and management to investors, much like the colonial division of labor. Both administrations demonstrate that capitalism works: a specialized skills-set can create abundant harvests which encourage sustainable management. Since Chinese-stimulated crops feed into the domestic market, China is technically alleviating Africa’s food problem even though profits go to Chinese firms, not nationals of the aid recipient.

Without too much publicity on the indirect relationship between its investments and assistance, China enjoys the image of a facilitator of the “Trade Not Aid” movement. As in English, the Chinese verbs for “help” and “aid” are easily confused because both indicate altruistic activities toward a third party. Technically, Chinese officials and media use “help” (*bangzhu*) to describe the performance of Chinese agricultural firms in Africa and reserve “aid” (*yuanzhu*) for traditional government-funded projects, but these terms are rarely distinguished in common parlance. What is more noticeable is that “colonialism” and “capitalism,” on the other hand, are terms reserved for Western private investment in Africa. As a result, Western farming investments are “colonialist” and “capitalist” because they exploit Africa for profit, but Chinese agricultural investments are seen as “help” to Africa because they improve food supply, albeit indirectly.

By definition, private investment is not aid and therefore cannot perfectly demonstrate China’s friendship towards Africa, so China still maintains a number of assistance projects for political appearances. In 2006, China committed to establishing 10 demonstration centers and sending 100 elite technicians to Africa. Even though this team of elite technicians may seem to be a new element of the PRC assistance package, China’s approach to aid has not changed since the 1980s and these technicians still form part of its “downsize and diversify” policy. Each elite technician costs about \$1900-2100 USD a month and is dispatched for only one year in the host country³⁰. For \$2.4 million USD, China has purchased the impression of generously increasing

aid to Africa, but it is not in actuality committing to sustainable programs to help Africa break away from its colonial economy.

As to be expected, the technicians faced numerous budgetary limitations and so many were quite inactive during their assistance assignments and even lied in their activity reports³¹. Since August 2009, they have channeled their energies into a web forum and produced new opinions on aid which have begun to attract widespread and academic attention³². Geng Naili, an elite agricultural envoy to Côte d'Ivoire uploaded a highly-praised report titled "How to Better Execute China-Africa Agricultural Cooperation". He opines that the Chinese government should use economic incentives to attract 160,000-320,000 Chinese peasants to Côte d'Ivoire to effect technical knowledge exchange to Ivorians and resolve the food supply problem; as a bonus, the Chinese peasants would make a fortune.³³ This is not the first time Chinese academics have considered sending farmers to help Africa,³⁴ but Geng's paper attracted Dr. Hao Feng, an elite agricultural envoy to Tanzania. Feng agrees wholeheartedly with Geng that "the best way to settle Africa's agricultural backwardness is to attract Chinese investors and peasants."³⁵ To help Geng's message reach a broader audience, Hao encouraged him to submit his paper to *South China Agriculture*, an academic journal of which Hao is the director.³⁶ I am not sure if Geng's paper is published *South China Agriculture* as of yet, but Geng has promulgated his views on another popular Chinese website. His second piece bears a self-explanatory title: "[Chinese] Peasant Entrepreneurs Should Emigrate to Africa Where Land is Abundant, People are Lazy, and Food Prices are Good. All [Chinese] Peasants Will Become Technicians in Africa."³⁷

Racism

Such colonialist and racist pronouncements by elite technicians support Philip Snow's analysis that Chinese "were no freer of original sin than the Europeans or Americans."³⁸ Chinese traditionally discriminated against all ethnic groups outside of China. External states or peoples beyond the Chinese cultural periphery were viewed as inferior and barbaric. In the twelfth-century, Zhu Yu's "Pingzhou Ketan" depicted black people eating raw food. White "barbarians" were considered slightly superior to blacks because at least they cooked their food.³⁹ During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, China was more open to the West and was exposed to the white enslavement of blacks. Henceforth, "black barbarians" were also called "black slaves" (heinu), "devil slaves" (guinu), and "barbarian devils" (fangui)⁴⁰ and this consolidated Africans as the lowest caste in Chinese worldviews.

The increase in conflicts between China and the West in the late nineteenth-century changed the Chinese impression of whites as barbaric, but there was no similar socio-economic force to temper the Chinese perspective of blacks. Worse, when Darwinism became popular in China, some reform-minded scholars adopted this theory and labeled blacks as inferior. Lian Qichao found Africans lustful of white women, slavish, backward, lazy, and dimwitted⁴¹. Yan Fu, who introduced Darwin's *Natural Selection* to China, ranked Africans the lowest race of human beings.⁴² Kang Youwei ranked whites as the best race and wished to ameliorate all others by whitening

darker races through dietary change, migration, and intermarriage. Kang was optimistic about improving yellow-skinned people but not blacks and proposed sterilization as an alternate solution because “the progress of a beautiful race should not be obstructed by bad black seeds.”⁴³

Chinese have perceived Africans as dimwitted, lazy, fierce, and odiferous⁴⁴, but in the early years of the PRC, communism masked China's racism and lent the Sino-Africa relationship a common identity in images of backwardness. To quote Mao, “[Westerners] say we Chinese are useless, we colored people are useless, we are dirty, and we are not elegant. We seem to be the same as Africans.”⁴⁵ Both of the PRC's major enemies at the time, Washington and Moscow, were white, so Chinese ignored their own identity and advocated for “us blacks to stick together against the white race.”⁴⁶

Even under Mao's vision of altruistic communism and harmonious Sino-African relations, however, racial discrimination against blacks was still rampant. Diplomats and technicians in Africa were reluctant to mingle with Africans,⁴⁷ and Chinese doctors suspected that Africans did not wash themselves regularly.⁴⁸ Chinese teachers generally perceived African students to be “uncultured, forgetful, and lazy.”⁴⁹ Even when Beijing was at the peak of its altruistic communism and the state required giving Africans exceptional hospitality, there were several African protests against Chinese racism in Beijing. A collective hunger strike in March 1962 resulted in 96 of 118 African students being sent home.⁵⁰

In the post-Mao era, the state largely withdrew from every aspect of society, so Africans were not as “equal” as before. Zhao Ziyang, who proposed the 1982 “mutual-benefit” policy toward Africa, wished to restore China's greatness by foregoing the Third World and aligning China with the West. This shift renewed the rhetoric of Chinese superiority over Africans: China's destiny lies with the progressive West rather than with backward peoples.⁵¹ When the reform started, racial riots and public demonstrations occurred in Shanghai in 1979 and 1980; Nanjing in 1979, 1980, 1988, and 1989; Tianjin in 1986 and 1989; and Beijing in 1982, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1987, 1988, and 1989.⁵² In these demonstrations and riots, Africans were described as inferior, backward, and uncivilized, so it was not wrong to call Africans “Black Devils” (*hei gui*)⁵³ or to condone “killing the Black Devils” (*sha hei gui*).⁵⁴ Two quotes from Chinese demonstrators capture this unabashed racism during this formative period of Sino-African relations: “we are walking towards a great future on a broad road to the advanced and civilized world, but we will not feed all of uncultured Africa with the results of our efforts or allow any Negroes to hang about our universities to disturb Chinese girls,”⁵⁵ and “blacks are just apes from trees who should go back to their own country and keep their diseased and lazy selves at home.”⁵⁶

As Malcolm X said, “You can't have capitalism without racism.” When economic reform turned the PRC's interests toward fortune-hunting, Africa's economic deficiencies no longer stimulated Chinese altruism, but strengthened Chinese racism. Kang Youwei's concerns about bad black seeds” resurfaced with special attention to the male-female relationship. The relationship between Chinese women and African men has attracted more attention. Many of the conflicts in the 1980s resulted from concerns about Africans “polluting Chinese society with their relations with Chinese

women,"⁵⁷ unlike the attitude towards Chinese-white interracial relationships which are taken to symbolize movement towards advancement, civilization, and prosperity.⁵⁸ Today, *China Safari* finds that Chinese are generally reluctant to mix with Africans, and even highly-sexed Chinese male laborers in Africa are not attracted to African women.⁵⁹

The Story of Malawi

The Myth of Helping 50,000

In 2008, Malawi terminated four decades of diplomatic relations with Taipei and turned to the PRC. Since Malawi's relationship with the PRC is only two years old, it serves as a unique case study of the PRC's agricultural strategy toward Africa.

The PRC's aid program seems to be tremendously efficient, especially compared to other aid donors such as Taiwan. Taiwan steadily sent agricultural assistance to Malawi for over forty years (1965-2008) but ostensibly did not produce the same results as the PRC. In terms of rice projects, Taiwan built and managed 15 large irrigated paddy rice projects which totaled roughly 2300 hectares. The Taiwanese tried to overcome obstacles such as poor governance, state enterprise monopolies, mechanical maintenance challenges, and learning Chichewa dialect to write a technical manual for local farmers, and finally estimated that these irrigation projects benefitted approximately 7799 Malawians.⁶⁰

Meanwhile, within two years, the PRC has "benefitted 50,000 Malawian peasants" in Balaka with a \$25 million USD cotton project. Its opening ceremony resembled those of old aid projects, with locals appreciating and welcoming the Chinese with song and dance while Malawian Vice President Joyce Banda explained to the masses that this is why Malawi must "discontinue its friendship with Taiwan."⁶¹ This project is so similar to assistance that some academics also mistook this cotton business as development aid.⁶²

Malawi's transition shows how China's priorities have moved away from agricultural aid. In old times, whenever the PRC replaced the ROC in an African state, Beijing's priority was to manage Taiwan-managed farms so that food production would not be affected by politics. PRC diplomats proudly remember how eagerly they took over the projects in Dahomey, Sierra Leone, and Lesotho,⁶³ where they sought to ensure food security and delink Africa from its colonial economic ties. When Malawi switched camps in 2008, Beijing did not take over any of Taiwan's agricultural assistance because food production in Malawi has never been profitable. Cotton, on the other hand, has been a competitive resource since colonial times. Beijing is not interested in agricultural assistance but Malawi is an agrarian society, so cotton production became a propaganda tool. Since the Chinese company purchases cotton from peasants, Beijing claims to "help eliminate Malawi's poverty."⁶⁴

In terms of economic theory, Beijing is helping Malawi's situation, but Malawians may not agree that they have been helped. China's Malawi Cotton Company (a joint venture of Qingdao Ruichang Cotton Industrial Company and China Color-Cotton Group) arrived to Balaka in 2008 to join

two other British companies in the cotton market. When Chinese first arrived, they offered 90-100 Kwacha per kilogram of cotton, so through the Balaka farmer's association, Malawi Cotton Company soon contracted with 50,000 peasants. They received Chinese seeds, fertilizer, and pesticides in the form of a loan which the company would deduct from the following year's cotton harvest. In 2009, the Chinese offered 42 Kwacha per kilogram of cotton, which was the market price, no higher than the other two British companies, and lower than the nationally regulated price of 70 Kwacha per kilogram. Peasants felt cheated so many refused to sell their cotton to Malawi Cotton Company.

All credit and loan measures are done through local farmer associations. Malawian farmers and this Malawi Cotton Company have no direct contact with one another; the company representatives in Balaka do not even know which farmers have contracted with them. Their relationship is a strict transaction: no personal care, no skills training, just a sum of money which does not cover living costs. As in colonial times, this economic framework trades cash crops for food; while the Chinese feel like they are helping Africans, Malawian peasants feel exploited.

Problems of Business-Based "Help"

Up to now, apart from taking over Taiwan's non-agricultural aid (Muzuzu hospital and a road between Karonga and Chitipa), assistance to Malawi consists mainly of two construction projects in Lilongwe. The first is a gift, a parliament building worth \$40 million USD, contracted to an Anhui state-owned enterprise. The second is a concession loan from China's Export-Import Bank for a conference center worth \$90 million USD, contracted to a Shanghai state-owned enterprise. Besides infrastructure, there are 20 young volunteer aid ambassadors stationed in Lilongwe. They are mostly recent graduates in their early twenties whose diplomatic duties include playing ping pong, promoting Chinese medicine, and Chinese language exchanges.⁶⁵ Few PRC endeavors relate to food security except for four horticultural volunteers conducting peripheral research in two agricultural institutions.

The greater impact on Malawians is the corresponding influx of Chinese businesses to Malawian cities and the Malawian countryside whose low-quality but cheap products and questionable business practices have driven out local enterprises. Most Chinese businesspeople in Malawi are extremely reluctant to integrate into local society. Being mostly unreligious and not fluent in the local languages, Chinese businesspeople are commonly ignorant of local laws and customs and tend to settle issues using the corrupt methods with which they are familiar in China. Negative reports regarding Chinese are everywhere, such as money laundering, illegal transport of foreign currency, bribery of officials, violence against Malawian employees, and sale of sexual organs.⁶⁶ Newly arrived Chinese care so little about Malawian law that the PRC embassy must warn businesspeople to "remember, this is their country."⁶⁷

Whenever there is a report on China, Malawians complain about discrimination and exploitation at the hands of Chinese. But, because Chinese consider their sales a form of assistance, they feel they deserve the locals' appreciation, so they respond harshly by calling Malawians "black dogs"⁶⁸ who would be "naked in the streets without the hard-working Chinese."⁶⁹ The first PRC envoy Fan Guijin was caught calling Malawians "beggars" three months after this new bilateral relationship began⁷⁰. The PRC embassy tried to emphasize the traditional Sino-African friendship by blaming the "bad image of Africa"⁷¹ on Western media, but while Chinese believe they are helping impoverished Malawians acquire low-priced goods, Malawian customers and merchants smart from unemployment and racist attitudes.

Some newly-arrived PRC citizens were advised to introduce themselves as Taiwanese for safety concerns.⁷² But, in fact, Chinese safety concerns in Malawi are much less serious than those in neighboring Zambia, where Chinese businesses are the targets of many crimes and where Chinese private enterprises have provoked the ire of locals.⁷³

The Making of Li's Story

Zambia attracts Chinese investments because its economic policy is friendly to foreign investors. Unlike Malawi, for instance, Zambia permits foreigners to own land, so in addition to traders, it attracts Chinese business farmers. Before Li's Jonken Farm, the biggest farm was the 667-hectare Sino-Zambia Friendship Farm. As its name implies, this farm was an assistance project, but it was privatized in 1990 because it was unprofitable. Jiangsu Agricorp (Jiangsu State Farms Group Corporation) and Zhongguo Agricorp (China National Agricultural Development Group Corporation) now hold 40% and 60% respectively of the Friendship Farm. Under new management, the farm soon turned a profit and also benefited China's political agenda as an assistance-oriented farm that provides food for Africa. In 2003, when Lee Ruihuan, Chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, visited this farm with Zambian politicians, the *People's Daily* reported:

A group of black men, women, and children dressed in their shiny ethnic garb, played their leather drums, danced, and sang [...] along the side of the road for the arrival of Mr Lee Ruihuan. [...], Lee gladly said [...] we must take this farm as a model to encourage friendly cooperation between China and Zambia.⁷⁴ Lee Ruihuan also commented "this is China's tradition of helping poor. This is humanity."⁷⁵

Chinese commercial activities now are commonly dressed as Sino-African "cooperation projects." The PRC embassy in the UK publicized the Sino-Zambian Friendship Farm as "a modern farm under cooperative management by China and Zambia. Thanks to the application of advanced farming technologies, the farm produced a bumper wheat harvest."⁷⁶ There is no mention of this being a private investment and that Zambia's "cooperative" contribution consists of part-time laborers that the seven Chinese

managers hire for \$1-2 USD a day even though the farm makes as much as \$400 000 USD a year.⁷⁷

Li's late husband, Wang Chi, worked in the Sino-Zambian Friendship Farm in the early 1990s. At one point, Zhongguo Agricornp decided to invest independently, so with an initial investment of \$220 000 USD, the company bought the 3573-hectare farm in 1993 and Wang left Sino-Zambia Friendship Farm for the new Jonken Farm (a Chinese abbreviation of Zhongguo Agricornp). Although Wang passed away in 2005, Jonken Farm remained successful with an annual business volume of \$3 million USD, 1000 cattle, 2000 pigs, 120 000 chickens, and also 200 local employees all under Li's care. *The People's Daily* measures Li's decade-long contribution to Zambia in terms of the 7000 jobs she has created, the 14000 people for whom she provides housing, the interest that she pays on her \$150 000 USD loan, and the free medical services she supplies that have helped thousands of locals.

Much of this "help" is, however, contentious. Li's "contribution" must be framed in China's indirect terms of "help": by raising product for the local market, Jonken improves the local food supply, and by hiring local hands, it alleviates local unemployment problems. Since Jonken has approximately 200 regular employees, the quoted 7000 jobs likely includes every part-time position available on the farm in the past 10 years. Zambian laws require employers to provide housing and health services for employees and their families, so the 14 000 beneficiaries should thank the Zambian state, not Li's benevolence. The interest Li pays on her \$150 000 loan is not so much an aide as it is a debtor fulfilling an obligation to the bank. Furthermore, although *The People's Daily* found someone anonymous to call Li an "angel,"⁷⁸ her employees consider her a tyrant. Contrary to the Chinese media's depiction, laborers fear Li and Wang even recalls the process of tempering her to be less fierce to their employees.⁷⁹

Chinese capitalism in Africa came with unabashed racism. *The People's Daily*, Li, and Wang all refer to Zambian laborers as "blacks" rather than "Zambians". When the media came to film the farm workers' relatively low living standards, Wang made no attempts to hide his sense of superiority. He stated that "these black people [...] usually steal from us. [T]hey stick to my enterprise like lice. [...] I am like a father to them."⁸⁰ Jonken is not alone in its attitude toward locals. Although famous PRC scholar Lu Ting-en reminds Chinese investors that Africans are very sensitive to racism because of their colonial history,⁸¹ few Chinese in Africa have heeded his advice. Even the Chinese-run hotel where I stayed in Zambia does not welcome African guests because they are perceived as dirty. In light of these stereotypes, it is easy to see that part of Li's so-called heroism comes from being cast as a poor widow toiling in backward Africa fending for herself amidst throngs of African men.

In actuality, Chinese investors like Li and most other businesspeople stay in Africa for monetary, not altruistic purposes and so their management skills are no different than from their Western predecessors. Although Mao once used the West as foil for China's commitment to Africa, Chinese investors think exactly like Western capitalists. The West's concept of market expansion is the major target of this model farm. "Compared with the West, Jonken is not large enough,"⁸² Li says, "in agricultural cooperation with Africa, the

PRC government should cooperate with small investors in order to enhance Chinese enterprises' influence in local agriculture."⁸³

Li is not the sole voice asking for more governmental participation in China-Africa investment. The success stories of Chinese businessmen construct Africa as an ideal emigration destination for Chinese peasants because of its relative abundance of land, uncompetitive locals, and the possibility to substantially relieve Chinese population and food pressures. Recently, a Chinese Ministry of Commerce study combined notions of aid, immigration, and commerce and encouraged the idea of "technological demonstration families"—that is, Chinese peasants running a profitable farm as a means to demonstrate farm management to African locals. Like Li's story, this study also suggested that the Chinese government intervene and use official Chinese aid to increase competition in Chinese agribusiness in Africa, and, for instance, "assist" Africa by building roads to Chinese farms.⁸⁴

Conclusion

China might be Africa's best friend because Beijing chooses business instead of charity⁸⁵, but the side effects of pure business in Africa include flashbacks to colonialism and racism in the Sino-Africa context, as demonstrated by Li's "touching" idyll. Contrary to China's once-altruistic and generous aid principles, current agricultural assistance projects are cost-cutting and focused on the bottom line. In essence, China seeks to resolve the African food problem by selling Chinese products. In the past, the Chinese taught Africans agricultural skills and built irrigation systems for free; now, Africa must pay to access Chinese technical knowledge. The Sino-Africa agricultural relationship is therefore a commercial one, but couched in terms of "cooperation" and "mutual-benefit" whereby Africans buy food from Chinese farming entrepreneurs and China increases its market share in Africa while easing its domestic population pressure.

On a macro-level, China indirectly assists Africa with its food supply difficulties and earns the fashionable image of being a pioneer of the "Trade Not Aid" movement. Vital to China's Africa policy, large private investments such as Jonken provide the same benefits to China's international image as agricultural assistance projects. These private farms fit China's "spend less and diversify" bill exactly: with economies of scale, they are able to have sizeable harvests, afford better technology, hire more local workers, and promulgate the rhetoric of Chinese altruism toward Africa with greater efficiency than smaller state-funded projects.

Curiously, China does not consider all of its investors as aid envoys when their businesses turn a profit. When China conducts business with the West, it does not purport to be "helping" or "benefitting" Westerners. Only when China engages with Africa do commercial measures morph into aid programs so charitable that they "touch" Africans on an emotional level. This paternalistic spin on Chinese business investments in Africa exposes the racist condescension of Chinese towards Africans. This manifestation of "Trade Not Aid" explains why Chinese investors are always reported to be "helping Africa" but also the targets wherever there is social unrest in Africa.

Although economic theory claims that trade brings mutual benefits, as the revolts against Chinese in Zambian copper mines signal, social unrest may arrive before wealth. Driven by capitalism and saturated with racism, the contemporary Sino-Africa cooperation model replicates the colonial system from whose shackles Chinese help initially sought to liberate Africa.

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