Management and Organization Review

Management and Organization Review 17:3, July 2021, 636–640
doi: 10.1017/mor.2021.43

Dialogue, Debate, and Discussion

How Is China Impacting African Cities?

Jeffrey W. Paller
University of San Francisco, USA

INTRODUCTION

Africa is amidst a huge structural transformation from a rural continent to an urban one. Its 3.5 percent urbanization rate is the fastest in the world. In 1970, only 18 percent of Africans lived in cities; this number increased to 40 percent by 2018. According to the United Nations' population division, 472 million Africans are now estimated to live in cities, with the number increasing each day. China is the only other place that has experienced such a profound and rapid shift, having added 700 million residents to its cities between 1978–2010 (Dercon, Haas, Kriticos, & Lippolis, 2019; Xie, Xu, Cai, & Wu, 2019). For this reason, China provides a model for what rapid urbanization might look like in African cities. But perhaps more importantly, it is actively shaping the contours of African urbanization through funding for infrastructure, planning expertise, and knowledge sharing. China has the potential to shape the future of African cities in three key areas.

CHINA AS A MODEL AND AN ENABLER

In the recent International Growth Center report, 'Can Africa learn from the Chinese urbanisation story?', Dercon and colleagues (2019: 5) point to four factors that explain how urbanization helped China alleviate poverty:

- Clear systems for land ownership and proactive planning to ensure the efficient and intensive development of urban land;
- Pro-active investment in infrastructure and services to meet the needs of citizens and to mitigate issues such as congestion, crime and contagious disease;
- Empowering local governments to raise finances and to pursue largescale, targeted investments needed to improve liveability;

Accepted by Editor-in-Chief Arie Y. Lewin
Corresponding author: Jeffrey W. Paller (jpaller@usfca.edu)

© The Author(s), 2021. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of The International Association for Chinese Management Research

https://doi.org/10.1017/mor.2021.43 Published online by Cambridge University Press

- Ensuring physical connectivity and an overall enabling environment for firm growth and investment.

African urbanization has not coincided with large-scale job creation as it did in China. And this is because these institutional and structural factors do not exist in many African cities. Part of the reason for this is that African cities are governed more like Indian cities, where an associational politics or 'a dense web of networks and alliances – in constant formation and mutation – among the state, the private sector, and civil society groups' (Ren, 2021: 9) make decisions over urban space. This is different from the Chinese model of urban governance, which relies on strong state administration and territorial jurisdictions. Simply translating the Chinese model to Africa fails to account for the underlying governance challenges that constrain development across the continent.

These are not just technical matters, but rather political challenges that have to be settled. For example, land ownership and planning remain ambiguous in many cities and have their roots in pre-colonial structures of power as well as racialized systems of urban planning left behind by colonial authorities (Klopp & Paller, 2019). Empowering local governments to raise finances is not only a matter of tax collection capacity but power struggles between different social groups and government jurisdictions. In some cases like the Lekki Free Trade Zone in Lagos, Nigeria, African governments adopt Chinese-inspired Special Economic Zones as a way to bypass existing rules and procedures but also strengthen links with the region. But some populations have experienced devastating consequences, like the loss of ancestral practices and displacement from their communities (Adunbi, 2019). As Adunbi and Butt (2019) summed up: 'Development infrastructures [modeled after the Chinese experience] can thus serve to erase local people's histories and can result in violent contestations'.

Equally worrisome is that Chinese investment sometimes exacerbates underlying political tensions. We see this clearly in the expansion of Addis Ababa – fueled by Chinese investment – where the growth of the city conflicts with Oromo claims to land and territory, contributing to local conflict (Burke, 2017). The building of social housing in Angola, funded and built with Chinese capital and contractors, served to strengthen the authoritarian government because it 'provided an opportunity for the central state to reinforce its influence over the lowest level of governance across the territory' (Buire, 2015). Authoritarian regimes in Ethiopia, Rwanda, and Angola have all used urban renewal schemes and housing investments to establish political order and strengthen political legitimacy (Croese & Pitcher, 2019). These relationships can strengthen authoritarian governments and create long-term dependency on China, potentially leaving out the needs of African populations in the process.

THE MEANING OF INFRASTRUCTURE

Moore (2021: 1) outlines the scale of Chinese investment in African infrastructure: Over the last 20 years, 'China has financed the construction of over 6000 km of

© The Author(s), 2021. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of The International Association for Chinese Management Research

https://doi.org/10.1017/mor.2021.43 Published online by Cambridge University Press

roads in Africa'. But, he continues, 'Investment in infrastructure has not kept pace with this growth – in cities like Harare and Maputo, more than 30 percent of land within five kilometers of the central business district remains unbuilt. In the average African city, roads occupy a lower share of urban land than comparable cities around the world' (Moore, 2021: 1). Chinese loans are attractive because they generally have longer grace periods, longer repayment schedules, and less conditionalities than Western loans (Benazeraf, 2014). China fills a different need than the developmental approach of the West by infusing large sums of capital into middle-class housing and infrastructure.

While China is helping fill the infrastructure gap, local communities often experience it on the ground as neocolonialism and meet it with resentment and resistance (Adunbi, 2019). They are sometimes displaced and lose homes. But more often than not, this depends on political conditions and not the guidelines of China or Chinese companies. The two railways in Kenya and Ethiopia are a case in point, as Carrai (2021) recently argued. She finds that local rules shape the implementation of the railway projects. In other words, Chinese contractors will adapt to local conditions on the ground.

African politicians and local authorities play an especially important role. For example, in the case of the Chinese-backed Great Wall Apartments project in Nairobi, Kenya, the mayor helped locate a suitable site (Benazeraf, 2014). Alternatively, Chinese contractors building the Nairobi-Thika Highway did not provide compensation for those displaced from the construction. The Kenyan government did not intervene, and even sent security agents to protect the company. Benazeraf (2014: 55) argued, 'this understanding allows the authorities to hold the Chinese responsible while also avoiding the cost of re-housing inhabitants'. While China offers capital and other resources, local political connections often determine which communities are displaced and which remain in place (Paller, 2020).

RESHAPING URBAN SPACE

China is investing in a massive expressway that goes through the middle of Nairobi. China Road and Bridge Corp is the contractor. The elevated expressway will not only cut down on traffic: it has the potential to create two Nairobis, or at least deepen the existing inequalities in the city. The worry is that the elevated toll road will be for the growing elite to drive their cars, while the poor and minibuses operate underneath. Importantly, the roads do not account for bicyclists and pedestrians, many of whom are working-class laborers making their livelihoods in the city. Some analysts go so far as to say that African cities are starting to look a lot like Chinese ones (Kuo, 2015). Some fear that Chinese contractors are not paying close enough attention to the local context (Zhuang, 2014).

Chinese urban planners are bringing their skills building Chinese cities to Africa (Xie, 2017). For example, Benazeraf and Alves (2014) documented how Chinese urban planners collaborated with Angolan planners as part of a 'shared

© The Author(s), 2021. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of The International Association for Chinese Management Research

https://doi.org/10.1017/mor.2021.43 Published online by Cambridge University Press

process' to build Kilamba, a satellite city outside of Luanda, Angola. The Angolan president at the time made the following statement: 'All planners want to stamp their signature on the project. We say: Chinese face and Angolan body'. Similarly, Hulshof and Roggeveen (2015) argued:

> *The modern Chinese city is based on heavy infrastructure and centrally-planned districts and zones, with a clear division between insiders and outsiders, further compounded by a widening gap between rich and poor. In this model, we observed, residential development consists almost entirely of gated communities and privatisation of public space.*

Chinese investment is contributing to a construction boom of gated communities, luxury housing, and potentially the privatization of urban space. Kilamba was built with Chinese support, which resembles the 'ghost towns' outside some of China's largest cities. While scholars have debunked the myth that these are ghost towns, they still represent a new form of architecture and use of public space based on private security and dense high-rises. Many of these communities are gated and serve as satellite cities that are disconnected from city centers except by car. Some worry that the Chinese-built satellite cities embody a new urbanization paradigm.

ADDITIONAL INFLUENCES

It is important to note that the Chinese influence is felt in other ways too. Chinese TV broadcasts in many cities across the continent, and several African capitals have Confucius Institutes that promote Chinese culture and teach Mandarin (Benabdallah, 2020; Benazeraf & Alves, 2014). China is investing heavily in ports, which greatly affect the economic potential of coastal cities (Devermont, 2019). China is also very active in the fishing industry, impacting the lives and livelihoods of fishing communities who live in coastal neighborhoods.

The model of urbanization that China espouses rests on a modernist logic backed by an authoritarian government. Part of this model rests on ridding urban areas of slums, as China has done through 70 years of slum removal policies. This misses the value of slums: places where opposition politics form and creative forms of social movements and collective action emerge (Paller, 2019). This can offer migrant and poor populations a right to the city that they would otherwise not have. Chinese investments in urban Africa have the potential to transform African cities, but some analysts worry that it will come at the expense of bulldozing the homes of existing populations and displacing residents from the city.

As more African countries 'look east', cities across the continent are changing in some fundamental ways. China's impact on urban development will be a crucial theme to follow well into the twenty-first century, as foreign investment, knowledge sharing, political learning, and network building will undoubtedly shape the face and structure of Africa's urbanization.

© The Author(s), 2021. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of The International Association for Chinese Management Research

https://doi.org/10.1017/mor.2021.43 Published online by Cambridge University Press

REFERENCES

Adunbi, O. 2019. (Re)Inventing development: China, infrastructure, sustainability and special economic zones in Nigeria. ***Africa***, 89(4): 662–679.

Adunbi, O., & Butt, B. 2019. Afro-Chinese engagements: Infrastructure, land, labour and finance Introduction. ***Africa***, 89(4): 633–637.

Benabdallah, L. 2020. ***Shaping the future of power: Knowledge production and network-building in China-Africa relations***. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Benazeraf, D. 2014. The construction of Chinese players of roads and housing in Nairobi. ***China Perspectives***, 1: 51–59.

Benazeraf, D., & Alves, A. 2014. 'Oil for housing': Chinese-built new towns in Angola. ***SAIIA Global Powers and Africa Programme***, Policy Briefing 88.

Buire, C. 2015. Views of suburban Luanda: Banishing the ghosts from Kilamba. ***Africa Research Institute***. Available from URL: https://www.africaresearchinstitute.org/newsite/blog/views-of-suburban-luanda-banishing-the-ghosts-from-kilamba/

Burke, J. 2017. 'It's life and death': How the growth of Addis Ababa has sparked ethnic tensions. ***The Guardian***. Available from URL: https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2017/mar/13/life-death-growth-addis-ababa-racial-tensions

Carrai, M. A. 2021. These two African railway megaprojects tell us a lot about China's development model. ***Washington Post***. Available from URL: https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/03/06/these-two-african-railway-megaprojects-tell-us-lot-about-chinas-development-model/

Croese, S., & Pitcher, M. A. 2019. Ordering power? The politics of state-led housing delivery under authoritarianism – The case of Luanda, Angola. ***Urban Studies***, 56(2): 401–418.

Dercon, S., Haas, A., Kriticos, S., & Lippolis, N. 2019. Can Africa learn from the Chinese urbanisation story? ***International Growth Center Policy Framing Paper***. Available from URL: https://www.theigc.org/publication/can-africa-learn-from-the-chinese-urbanisation-story/

Devermont, J. 2019. Assessing the risks of Chinese investments in sub-Saharan African ports. ***Center for Strategic and International Studies***. Available from URL: https://www.csis.org/analysis/assessing-risks-chinese-investments-sub-saharan-african-ports

Hulshof, M., & Roggeveen, D. 2015. Facing east. ***Storefront Newsprint***. Available from URL: https://more-architecture.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/20150616-Storefront-Newsprint-Essay.pdf

Klopp J., & Paller, J. 2019. Slum politics in Africa. ***Oxford research encyclopedia of politics***. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kuo, L. 2015. Photos: African cities are starting to look eerily like Chinese ones. ***Quartz Africa***. Available from URL: https://qz.com/africa/480625/photos-african-cities-are-starting-to-look-eerily-like-chinese-ones/

Moore, W. G. 2021. How do we pay for Africa's infrastructure? ***Substack***. Available from URL: https://gyudemoore.substack.com/p/how-do-we-pay-for-africas-infrastructure

Paller, J. W. 2019. ***Democracy in Ghana: Everyday politics in urban Africa***. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Paller, J. W. 2020. The contentious politics of urbanization: Insights from Africa. ***APSA Comparative Politics***, XXX(1): 57–65.

Ren, X. 2021. ***Governing the urban in China and India: Land grabs, slum clearance, and the war on air pollution***. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Xie, W. 2017. Chinese urban planners are helping small African cities transition into major metropolises. ***Global Times***. Available from URL: https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1075576.shtml

Xie, F., Xu, K., Cai, F., & Wu, Z. 2019. On the road to quality urbanisation. ***Telegraph Online***. Available from URL: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/china-watch/business/urbanisation-in-china/

Zhuang, J. 2014. How Chinese urbanism is transforming African cities. ***Metropolis***. Available from URL: https://www.metropolismag.com/cities/how-chinese-urbanism-is-transforming-african-cities/

© The Author(s), 2021. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of The International Association for Chinese Management Research

https://doi.org/10.1017/mor.2021.43 Published online by Cambridge University Press