

# China in Africa: Soft Power and the Development of Neocolonial States

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## Abstract

Through investment, loans, political influence, and migration, China is utilizing an inventive form of neocolonialism on African nations that continues the cycle of underdevelopment. It is a colonialism that does not mirror the tactics and strategies of the Europeans before, but instead creates the façade of partnership and trust for the extraction of natural African wealth through soft power. This study is meant to examine how Sino-African investment is affecting African economies, resources, labor, environment, and diplomacy and argue that it fulfills the requirements of neocolonialism. The methodology for this study is mixed methods, including analytical, applied, and exploratory research. Using secondary sources, such as books, journals, and data sites, the research consists of collecting data and displaying it under different circumstances to support the argument and raise new questions. An example of this is with the section on labor, where the absence of labor rights is attractive or unattractive depending on the context or point of view of the scenario. Although this creates complexities in the research process, it also opens new inquiries and arguments. Through each section, the attributes of China's soft power through a continued interest in African resources will show its equivalence as a neocolonial force that keeps African nations dependent on Chinese investment.

## Introduction

Africa is abundant with various resources that China seeks for its economic growth. To invest in those resources, China trades construction projects, through its advanced and heavily invested engineering, in the form of loans to build African infrastructure. This trade-off gives China its missing resources and Africa its basic infrastructure. The root of this exchange runs deep, and it not only heavily favors China's development as a world power but also contributes to the underdevelopment of the African nations accepting the loans, investments, and diplomatic conditions.

European colonization of Africa founded our understanding of underdevelopment. Through decades of brutal regime over African nations, colonialism destroyed their ability to economically profit from their land and globally invest. Walter Rodney, author of *How Europe Under-*

*developed Africa*, defined underdevelopment as the product of imperial and colonial exploitation from the developed world. The wealth of colonized nations is extracted through the exploitation of colonized labor, with the profits proceeding only to the colonizer. Using the term underdeveloped over "developing" is an important distinction, according to Rodney (1972), as it indicates the exploitation of that community by another and breaks the conception that those nations are "escaping from a state of economic backwardness relative to the industrial nations of the world" (p. 14-15). This underdevelopment made it difficult for African nations to depend on their own economies to thrive and participate in the global markets.

## Defining "Neocolonialism" and "Soft Power"

The difficulty of defining neocolonialism is not



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with the word itself but with defining its root word: colonialism. Colonialism will be defined as “the projects and practices of control marshaled in interactions between societies linked in asymmetrical relations of power and the processes of social and cultural transformation resulting from those practices” (Dietler, 2010, p. 30). This broad definition allows for comparative analysis of the multitude of colonial strategies and practices (Dietler, 2010, p. 30). Neocolonialism is, literally, “new” colonialism. It is a form of colonialism that has persisted after the independence movements of newly sovereign nations. Kwame Nkrumah, the first Prime Minister and then first President of Ghana, was the first to coin the term neocolonialism. Nkrumah (1965) stated that “The essence of neo-colonialism is that the State which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. Its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside” (p. ix). This refers to an indirect control of a political entity over another, where one nation profits from the resources and services of another without direct force or command. Nkrumah is exposing how, despite the independence of once colonial nations, foreign capital continued to find a way to guide policy.

Soft power, especially when it comes to China, is the key factor in neocolonialism. It is “defined by a policy of attraction rather than coercion.” There are rules that establish soft power strategies: they come from a feeling of value and respect, they are based on intangible assets, such as loans and investments, and they have variations depending on the situation (Kelly, 2017). Soft power as a tactic is essential because it differentiates from the colonial history of Western powers in Africa for a system that comes off as diplomatic. The Chinese Foreign Minister, when touring Kenya, stated that China “will not take the old path of Western colonists, and [it] absolutely will not sacrifice Africa’s ecological environment and long-term interests” (Manero, 2022). What essentially appears to be diplomatic favors and resources in exchange for investment and infrastructure, soft power is a hidden,

patient tactic for political and economic control over resource-rich nations.

## Why is China Interested in Africa?

China is a rapidly growing nation. Their economy averaged an annual growth rate of 10% from 1990-2010 (Albert, 2017) and is currently growing after a drop from the pandemic at around 4% (“China: GDP Growth Rate”, 2022). It is the world’s largest energy consumer and producer, with a heavy reliance on coal and oil consumption to keep up with those needs (“China: GDP Growth Rate”, 2022). Although China exports its own oil, the nation became a net importer in 1993 and recently surpassed the United States as the largest oil importer (Albert, 2017). China, with the goal of finding access to cheaper crude imports, turned to Africa for help. China receives 1.4 million barrels per day, and the nation receives imports from Angola, the Republic of the Congo, and South Sudan (Albert, 2017). Chinese interests extend beyond just oil; there is also substantial interest in using African resources to sustain its electronic industries. China sees Africa as a method of shifting the structure of its economy. It moves away from labor-intensive and pollutant industries, as labor costs continue to increase domestically, and relocates those industries to Africa (Hanauer & Morris, 2014). This is to combat the declining competitive advantage of China’s hold on the manufacturing industry, as relocating these industries to regions with a cheaper labor cost would bring back China’s competitive advantage. This is shown as “a 5% shift of Chinese export-related investments in the industry could translate into \$5.4 billion in additional exports— a 233% increase” (Altenburg, 2019).

Africa is an abundantly rich continent full of natural resources that attract nations for trade. In 2019, the continent produced 1 billion tons of minerals totaling \$406 billion, making up 5.5% of all the world’s minerals extracted (“Mapping

Africa's", 2022). Africa is the center of 30% of all mineral reserves, 12% of all oil reserves, 8% of natural gas reserves, 40% of the world's gold, and up to 90% of its chromium and platinum ("Mapping Africa's", 2022). The continent is estimated to hold a third of the earth's minerals ("Mapping Africa's", 2022). Most of this is consolidated within five countries that hold two-thirds of the continent's mineral wealth: South Africa (\$125bn), Nigeria (\$53bn), Algeria (\$39bn), Angola (\$32bn), and Libya (\$27bn) ("Mapping Africa's", 2022). Petroleum is the most abundant resource in 22 out of Africa's 54 countries, and it is close to the top in countries where it is not the first ("Mapping Africa's", 2022). Since 2019, Nigeria has produced most of the continent's petroleum, at 25%, followed by Angola at 17% and Algeria at 16% ("Mapping Africa's", 2022). The Democratic Republic of the Congo alone produced 63% of the world's cobalt in 2019, and with Rwanda, they produce half of the world's tantalum ("Mapping Africa's", 2022). Africa also produces about half of the world's stock of manganese, and significant amounts of coltan, which is used in electronics (Shepard, 2022). Africa is also predicted to house 85% of the global supply of platinum, 30% titanium, and 75% of phosphates (Mohan et al., 2014, p. 57). China wants control of these resources, and so it is heavily investing in these sectors.

China wants to raise its political influence and legitimacy. Strengthening relationships in Africa is believed to raise not just China's political influence, but also its trust as an international investor. An example of this is seen in the fact that most African governments would support Chinese endeavors, such as their "One China" policy that denounces the recognition of Taiwan and their investments (Hanauer & Morris, 2014). This political influence is a crucial step for China to initiate business with Africa. Many of the conditions for receiving Chinese investments are political favors, and this greatly leans in China's favor over the African nations.

## Aid or Investment?

There is continuous confusion with the vernacular around Chinese "aid" to Africa. The reference to "aid" usually suggests an altruistic action or charity from one entity to another without the basis of an exchange for something in return. Examples of this are shipping medical supplies overseas for a nation that experiences a drastic hurricane, sending food and water to locations suffering from a drought, or sending volunteers to rebuild infrastructure. These actions described are at the expense of a country other than the one affected.

When discussing Chinese aid to Africa, the focus is on systemic aid: aid payments from governments to other governments (Moyo, 2010, p. 7). Within systemic aid from China to Africa, the categories are complete projects, goods and materials, technical cooperation, human resource development cooperation, medical assistance, emergency humanitarian aid, volunteer programs, and debt relief (Moyo, 2010, p. 7). The aid categories include issues of education, transportation, energy, communications, and health (Moyo, 2010, p. 7). Most of these aid categories are within financial aid, encompassing infrastructure, and China's own policy actively contributes to the confusion within its loans and aid. The CCP encourages its entities to "closely mix and combine foreign aid, direct investment, service contracts, labor cooperation, foreign trade and export" (Sun, 2016). This dishonestly combines attributes defined as aid with those that are loans to be repaid. A theory with that distinction is that the Chinese government "pays for the difference between the interest rates of concessional loans provided to Africa and comparable commercial loans" (Sun, 2016). This difference being paid would be quantified as Chinese aid, and China markets that capacity to its fullest, bringing about the idea that they bring aid to Africa.

Although Chinese FDI and loans in Africa are seen as "aiding" African nations, they should not be recognized as aid since what is happening

involves an exchange of goods and services. The distinctions of aid are constantly unsuccessful “to separate Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) in Africa from its aid projects, commercial deals, and implementation of contracts for African governments and other organizations,” which leads to these activities being intermingled (Shinn, 2016, p. 27). Although CCP analysts silently acknowledge the blur between aid and financing (Sun, 2016), there is yet to be a public distinction with the type of aid constantly implemented and stated by China. The category of systemic aid fills the gaps to acknowledge the finance as a form of “aiding” African nations while indicating that there is an exchange in return for the aid. Note that systemic aid is used synonymously with Chinese FDI and loans.

## Chinese Investment

In the 1960s, Maoist China made an investment with Tanzania and Zambia. They would build a railway line from the port city of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania to Kapiri Mposhi in Zambia — the heart of the copper belt. The project took almost 50,000 Chinese managers and project leaders and 100,000 workers from Zambia and Tanzania, performed the majority of the hard labor (Poplack, 2016). For Tanzanian and Zambian revolutionaries, this railway was a crucial development as it allowed the nations to export their resources and reap the profits. This railroad was fully paid for by the Chinese with an interest-free loan to be paid back over 30 years (Poplack, 2016). This started the initial developments of a “win-win” relationship with China and African nations as it allowed China to push its way to have a seat at the UN (Poplack, 2016). On top of creating strong political allies, China was able to expand its rule to encompass new areas full of resources. Seeing the benefits of the copper mine, this deal was the beginning of a new era of Chinese interest in African affairs.

Investment from China into Africa has rapidly increased from \$210 million in 2000 to \$3.17 billion in 2011 (Sun, 2016). In 2018, that

number rose to \$5.4 billion (Fu, 2021). Between those years, China promised up to \$67 billion in FDI, loan packages, and infrastructure spending (Kelly, 2017). This funding has gone into 50 of the 54 African countries, including the construction of entire cities in Angola, railroad systems across Tanzania, and highways across all nations (Kelly, 2017). There are five main sectors for Chinese investment: construction, mining, manufacturing, financial services, leasing, and business services (Fu, 2021). Construction and mining make up the bulk of that investment.

Infrastructure is China’s main area for Chinese investment. Construction capital from China is categorized into two forms: concessional loans from Chinese policy banks and Chinese-owned contracts implementing the designs (Lee, 2017, p. 47). Concessional loans, the emphasis in this essay, are attractive to African nations. This is because they focus on construction rather than human capacity building, and the loans are prioritized by the African governments’ interests in infrastructure, which skip criteria such as social or environmental benefits. The main, and most recognizable, reason for the attractiveness of Chinese concessional loans is that China and African nations have a shared definition and understanding of development. China recognized the urgency for infrastructure (Lee, 2017, p. 48) and this is likely due to China’s own development through the building stages of China’s economy after WWII.

Chinese loans and economic growth in Africa are linked in a positive relationship that helps both entities (Mlambo, 2022, p. 18). It is reliant, however, upon the African nations’ ability to control the openness of their trade and their import levels. Boosting international trade is essential, and it is shown to be most efficient with raw material exports and manufactured material imports, which is exactly what China provides. FDI, however, is shown to require additional investment in human capital, such as skills and apprenticeships for jobs, for it to validate economic growth (Mlambo, 2022, p. 19).

Examples of investments include China giving out more than \$60 billion in construction plans that have been used to build “stadiums, highways, airports, schools, hospitals and, in Angola, an entire city that still stands empty” in 2014 (Poplack, 2016). China was there from the beginning with Sudanese oil fields and invested early in its development (Shinn, 2016, p. 48). China invested \$12 billion on the Coastal Railway in Nigeria, \$4.5 billion for the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway, and \$11 billion on a megaport in Bagamoyo (Shepard, 2022). China also invested in energy schemes, which included financing \$6.7 billion in hydropower projects to assist with Africa’s power crisis (Ofosu & Sarpong, 2022, p. 145). China also assisted Tanzania by funding a \$1.2 billion gas field development project (Ofosu & Sarpong, 2022, p. 146). Through these investments, Chinese companies have begun to build a reputation for “good quality and timely work,” which has increased their popularity (Ofosu & Sarpong, 2022, p. 146). China has established itself in Africa as a sophisticated business entity that markets its ambition for partnership with African nations. This partnership, however, comes with provisions.

## Political Influence

Political favors are a common tactic utilized by China to maintain its share of resources and diplomatic achievements. There is a strong correlation between the amount of aid that China gives to a nation and that nation’s support for China’s foreign policy (Manero, 2022). The most prominent one is isolating Taiwan. It is the most consistent demand of China for any nation to which it grants loans or systemic aid. Chinese officials forced a deal with Zambia stating that for the nation to continue to receive investment for the copper mines, it must denounce its ties with Taiwan (Lee, 2017, p. 35). Kenya was forced into a similar situation in 2016, when the nation deported 50 Taiwanese nationals to China (Manero, 2022). Sao Tome and Principe broke off its relations with Taiwan to re-establish them

with China (Manero, 2022). China has also enacted an approval rating scheme, where every 10% increase in United Nations voting support leads to increased aid averaging 86% (Manero, 2022). These schemes are very attractive to the underdeveloped nations of Africa, but in the end, they take away the autonomy of those nations from developing on their own and making proper diplomatic ties to benefit their citizens.

The alternative to these deals is with the EU: the same nations that colonized them decades prior. The EU announced in 2021 that they “pledged to mobilize up to \$340 billion by 2027 to support a green and digital transition around the world” to combat China’s investment strategies (Farand, 2021). It would include “€2.4 billion (\$2.7bn) in grants for sub-Saharan Africa and €1.08bn (\$1.2bn) for North Africa to support the roll out of renewable energy” (Farand, 2021). The problem with these alternatives is that the EU is not trusted across Africa when compared to China because they do not consult African nations. Ovigwe Eguegu, a Nigerian policy adviser, stated that the EU does not listen to African demands and that “You can’t expect any enthusiasm because there is just ignorance of what these promises will mean and how they will translate on the ground” (Farand, 2021). In contrast to China, where they continuously hold meetings and consult with their African partners, partnerships with Europe feel rushed and inconsiderate of African issues (Farand, 2021).

The presence of Chinese activities has garnered overall strong support from African people. African officials “overwhelmingly view China’s role in Africa positively, welcoming China’s heavy emphasis on government-to-government contracts with few, if any, strings attached” (Hanauer & Morris, 2014) which indicates the strength of these relationships. Much of this comes from the contributions of Chinese infrastructure, which improves economic activity in these countries and sets up viable telecommunications and transportation networks that

benefit citizens. Statements made by African leaders indicate strong favoritism for partnership with China. Former Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta stated that he believes “it has huge potential for a win-win situation for all who are involved, and that is why we are very keen as a country, and I believe also as a continent, to partner strongly with China” (Mlambo, 2022, p. 9). Former Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni strongly defended Uganda’s partnership with China, taking on loans, and he pushed back against critics who stated Uganda was afraid of opposing China (Mlambo, 2022, p. 9). With strong support from African leaders, it is persuasive that Chinese investment is positive for the nation and its people.

Outside of political leaders, China’s presence in Africa has generally good reviews from locals. There are generally favorable views of China in Africa: 90% of those living in the Ivory Coast and Mali, 81% from Senegal and Kenya, 75% of Ghanaians and Nigerians, and 78% of Tanzanians (Moyo, 2010, p. 109). With that, most Africans view China’s presence as more beneficial than the United States’ presence (Moyo, 2010, p. 109). When it came down to those who state Chinese business is bad, a survey done with the 25% of Nigerian and Ghanaian locals who stated unfavorable views of China in Africa showed that the reasons were 35% taking natural resources, 25% flooding markets, and 16% taking jobs (Mohan et al., 2014, p. 8). Overall, Africans have a positive view of Chinese influence.

## Labor

Chinese enterprises are heavily criticized by labor unions for poor labor conditions, unsustainable environmental procedures, and job displacement from Chinese enterprises (Hanauer & Morris, 2014). Zambia had a significant incident of abusing African laborers in 2017 when over thirty Chinese nationals were arrested for illegal mining practices that included child labor and unlicensed smelting (Kelly, 2017).

Within 48 hours of the arrest, all the miners were sent back to China, escaping any form of legal action from the Zambian government (Kelly, 2017). The Chinese government claimed that the evidence was not substantial, and they used their political power, such as their billion-dollar investments in the nation, to protect their citizens (Kelly, 2017). This is an early indicator of neocolonialist tendencies that mirror those of European colonization. There was no accountability system for the colonial supervisors who brutalized the colonized, and the imperial powers would not hold trials for the crimes done by their citizens. Problems within Zambia go back further to 2013, when the nation was forced to drop murder charges against two Chinese nationals (Kelly, 2017). The crime? Shooting 13 African miners. Under pressure from the Chinese government, Zambia was forced to let the men go (Kelly, 2017).

A similar situation occurred in Ghana. In 2013, 168 Chinese nationals were arrested for illegal gold mining (Kaiman & Hirsch, 2013). Their activities created various problems for water pollution through toxins such as pesticides, mercury, and cyanide (Kaiman & Hirsch, 2013). The arrests were made after numerous pit collapses killed dozens of Ghanaian miners (Kaiman & Hirsch, 2013). The cost of cleaning that water is expensive, and the Chinese are not investing in Ghanaian water foundations to remedy the issue. On top of that, China sent diplomats to the country to secure the release of the convicted Chinese nationalists (Kaiman & Hirsch, 2013). These are consistent activities that show China’s dominance, which is taking over the justice systems of the African nations. There is no guarantee that those Chinese nationals were held accountable for their actions.

Regarding job displacement, the reality is not as negative. Around 89% of workers in these Chinese companies were African, with about two-thirds of those companies providing skill or apprenticeship training (Jayaram et al., 2020). There is a substantial emphasis on opening jobs and opportunities for African workers as a part

of China's plan. This contributes to a common theme in Sino-African trade: migration. The CCP had set up websites, one of which was called "Go to Africa," to help interested citizens find the resources they needed to travel abroad. The establishment of banks has also encouraged Chinese citizens, as it would help transfer funds (Mohan et al., 2014, p. 46). When it comes to Chinese corporations, the hierarchy of labor is skewed favorably toward the Chinese. Most managers and people in high-ranking positions at job sites are Chinese (Ofosu & Sarpong, 2022, p. 149). This is shown across Angola, Tanzania, Zambia, Rwanda, etc., and it can be concluded that most of these companies did not employ local African workers to fill high-ranking positions (Ofosu & Sarpong, 2022, p. 149). It is likely that more than 80% of the workers will be locals, but the highly skilled or upper-management positions will be occupied by Chinese nationals (Ofosu & Sarpong, 2022, p. 150). This indicates an issue: Chinese officials actively favor Chinese nationals over Africans to fill higher ranking positions. This takes away the autonomy of the local workers, as they are not able to bring back higher wages and skills to their communities. Instead, that money goes to the Chinese nationals, and therefore, the profits are more likely to recirculate back to China through the banking system.

## Environmental Impacts

China has been repeatedly criticized for environmental degradation through its investment in Africa. The main issue has to do with China's relocation of its most polluting industries. China has been making strides to decrease its output of pollution within its national boundaries, but that has also come at the cost of moving those high-polluting industries overseas. Africa is one of those places, and China has moved many of its steel, glass, leather, and cement industries to African nations for a cleaner environmental footprint and cheaper labor (Shinn, 2016, p. 40). This reduces all the pollutants in China while also meeting the demands of Afri-

can nations to invest in job-creating industries (Shinn, 2016, p. 40).

An example of this is Hebei Iron and Steel, which is China's largest steel producer. Originally in the Hebei Province, the company built a plant that could make five million tons of steel every year in South Africa (Shinn, 2016, p. 40). This will continue to increase in the future, with hopes to encapsulate offshore productions of steel and cement into Africa by 2023 (Shinn, 2016, p. 41). With these projects being expanded, the amount of pollution will continue to drastically increase.

Alongside these natural pollutants from certain industries, China has utilized poor waste cleaning methods. Somalian residents near the Jeronimo Group Industries & Trading PLC, a glove-making firm, complained that "the company has been dumping waste into the river, causing harm to the livestock industry" (Shinn, 2016, p. 41). Instead of acting against it, the Somalian government refused to interfere as they felt it would discourage additional foreign investments (Shinn, 2016, p. 41).

As previously stated, Chinese loans are attractive as they do not contain criteria for proper environmental practices or labor rights, which create costs. It seems that those requirements should have been taken into consideration or even handled by the governments of African nations themselves to ensure those regulations are put in place. Ethiopia is an example of this, as in 1997, their government "enacted a wide range of legal, policy, and institutional frameworks regarding the environment, water, forests, climate change, and biodiversity," which takes environmentalism more seriously than most other African nations (Shinn, 2016, p. 44). China actively adapts its guidelines to improve upon the criticisms of its negative environmental effects. These improvements are slow, and they recognize a lack of care for the well-being of African laborers.

# Neo-Colonialism through Soft Power

China has consistently argued against claims about its neocolonial structure in Africa. In 1996, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated five public foundations for Sino-African trade: “To foster a sincere friendship between the two sides and become each other’s reliable ‘all-weather friends,’ To treat each other as equals and respect each other’s sovereignty and refrain from interfering in each other’s internal affairs, To seek common development on the basis of mutual benefit, To enhance consultation and cooperation in international affairs, To look into the future and create a more splendid world” (Kelly, 2017). These statements hide the reality of China’s practices and goals of exploiting the African continent for cheap labor, resources, political influence, and settler expansionism.

The soft power concessional loan system brings the strongest criticism for Chinese neocolonialism. Considered “predatory loans,” they seem attractive for economic and infrastructural development, but these loans do not guarantee timely investment (Mlambo, 2022, p. 12). As loans pile up when nations continue to accept them, these nations owe China billions of dollars through the extraction of their natural resources. This lack of transparency when it comes to debt points in the favor of the Chinese economy. Alongside transparency, China has been criticized for the creation of vanity projects. These are projects that do not reinvest profit back into the African nations: airports with few passengers, bridges that lead nowhere (Mlambo, 2022, p. 11), or empty cities that are left deserted (Pocklack, 2016).

Angola, for example, received a loan of \$2 billion in infrastructure, which included the construction of the city of Nova Cidade de Kilamba, in exchange for the nation’s oil (Kelly, 2017). As oil prices drop, Angola’s debt has skyrocketed to \$25 billion, and they have fallen behind on paying back their loan (Kelly, 2017).

Because of this, China gained more control over Angola’s petroleum reserves. Chinese imports comprise 35% of Angola’s economy, so Angola has the choice of either giving up control of its mines or abandoning its deals with China altogether. If the first option is chosen, the nation is at risk of China refusing to purchase Angolan imports, which would sink Angola’s economy. If the second option is chosen, Angola is stuck in a continuing debt situation. This suggests Angola as a neo-colony (Kelly, 2017); it’s economically dependent on an outside nation.

These are the workings of debt-traps where China is “saddling Africa with unsustainable debt and seeks to use indebtedness to further its geopolitical control over the continent” (Mlambo, 2022, p. 13). Since China is the nation providing the loans, and these countries have built up a system where they depend on exports to China, China can have a strong influence on diplomatic and economic concessions outside of the loan and investment agreements (Mlambo, 2022, p. 13). The term “debt-trap” was coined by Brahma Chellaney (2017), who showed that China exchanges by “requiring countries to award it contracts for additional projects, thereby making their debt crises interminable”. To get out of these debt-traps, nations are told to hand over their project leadership or management to Chinese state-owned firms, sell majority ownership of investments, or even sign new contracts for additional projects that accumulate the debt (Chellaney, 2017).

Although there is criticism of the idea of Chinese debt-traps, these studies are misguided. China consistently calls the debt-traps a tactic of the US to discredit China’s investments abroad (Bartlett, 2022) and that it is “motivated more by frantic Sinophobia than any genuine concern for the economic and fiscal health of African countries” (Singh, 2020, p. 242). In August 2022, China announced that 23 interest-free loans across 17 African countries had been forgiven (Savage et al., 2022). Specifically, it was a cancellation of the outstanding balance from the loans (Bartlett, 2022). With the interest-

free loans, from 2000-2019, China canceled at least \$3.4 billion of such debt in Africa and also restructured or refinanced \$15 billion (Savage et al., 2022). However, as pointed out by Reuters, the interest-free loans that China has forgiven make up only a small portion of China's lending, which has been called "low hanging fruit" (Savage et al., 2022). These debt cancellations do not apply to interest-bearing commercial loans (Bartlett, 2022) which make up the majority of lending and debt in African nations (Savage et al., 2022).

Another argument against the debt-trap idea comes from author Ajit Singh. He states that debt-trap diplomacy is not accurate in its depiction of China's overall international lending practices (Singh, 2020, p. 241). With examples in Africa, Singh states that "the vast majority, over two-thirds, of the external debt owed by African governments is to multilateral institutions such as the World Bank and non-Chinese private creditor" (Singh, 2020, p. 242). While this indicates that most of the debt in African nations is not with China, this statistic is independent of China setting up debt-traps. Having the World Bank and non-Chinese private creditors make up most of the debt is separate from China's debt traps and should be seen as two separate issues. The argument that Singh presents makes a stronger case to explain why African nations decide to trade with China rather than the nonexistence of a Chinese debt-trap in Africa.

## Conclusion

An ongoing trend with Sino-African investment is the absence of investments in budget support, health, or education. Aside from investing in human capital skills, China has not invested in any sort of economic area for the health of African people. This lack of investment, as well as consistent labor rights abuses, indicates the façade of partnership between the nations. With China's marketing of its supposed "aid" in Africa, it would be normal to expect investments

in health and education. For an underdeveloped country, those are the main investments to make for social mobility. Tied to the vanity projects, it is evident that China's loans lack transparency to allow African governments to decide where their funding is headed.

The cities, railroads, mines, airports, high-rises, highways, and everything else built under the concessional loans from China do not belong to the nations of Africa. They belong to China. Until those debts are entirely paid off, the concessional loan system will continue to pile on as debts climb. China can then formulate new agreements that sway heavily in their favor. This is neocolonialism through soft power: a nation's attraction to intangible loans and investments that then consolidate a dependent relationship to an authoritative power that regulates diplomacy, migrates its citizens, and receives raw exports from the said nation. African nations must recognize this theory of underdevelopment and take a stronger stance toward self-sustaining their own economies without having to rely on one predatory and colonial entity.

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