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An Analysis of Burgeoning Sino-African Relations

Hannah Christensen

Introduction:

Traditional, asymmetric, neo-colonialist relationships between African nations and their former colonizers have remained largely undisturbed since their establishment in the decolonization period of the 1960s. With the exponentially increasing activity of China in Africa since the 1990s, this long-standing status quo has finally been challenged. Since the beginning of China's return to Africa, the academic debate has circled around the controversies of China's actions on the continent, with many scholars and political figures decrying the trend as neo-colonialist. Others, however, have countered this argument, stating that it is hypocritical, or lacking in substance. To this end, this paper aims to crystallize the definition of neo-colonialism in this controversial academic debate by returning to the term's original popularization by Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah in 1965. This paper will create a new conceptual framework to apply this re-centered definition to the modern trend in Sino-African relations. Using this framework, this paper shows that China's latest foray into Africa is in line with Nkrumah's original description of neo-colonialism, though it argues that in some cases this may still be an improvement from the status quo. Following in the footsteps of the Beijing Model of development, I argue that this new evolution in Sino-African relations will result in a stronger prioritization of economic rights over political rights, and while it might result in economic benefits in some cases, it will also likely result in a move away from democracy globally.

This paper is organised as follows. First, I review the current literature in academic debates over the nature of Sino-African relations, analysing debates based on the three schools of thought first outlined by Simplice A. Asongu (2016, p. 354): optimistic; pessimistic; and

accommodative. I then develop a conceptual framework for the operationalised definition neo-colonialism, based heavily on Kwame Nkrumah's 1965 work, *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*, and broken into three facets: economic neo-colonialism; political neo-colonialism; and cultural neo-colonialism. This conceptual framework will then be applied to modern Sino-African relations to better understand the nature and complexities of recent trends in China's increased involvement on the African continent.

Literature Review:

Existing literature on the nature of Sino-African relations is very divided. This paper splits arguments over modern Sino-African relations into two distinct questions: to what extent is the current Sino-African relationship neo-colonialist? Secondly, is the recent trend in increased Sino-African relations beneficial to Africa as a whole? As it stands, existing debates can be split into three dominant schools of thought which scholar Simplice Asongu terms 'pessimistic', 'optimistic', and 'accommodative' (2016, p. 354).

The pessimistic school of thought presents a view that China's engagement in Africa is a threat to Africa (Naím, 2007, p.95) and to the longstanding Western hegemony on the continent (Campbell, 2008, p.89). Pessimistic arguments include criticisms of the economic, cultural, and political elements of China's involvement in Africa. Giovannetti and Sanfilippo (2009) present their argument from an economic standpoint, stating that China's exports are flooding Africa's markets and crowding out local goods, leaving African industries even more vulnerable (p. 506),

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while Breslin and Taylor (2008) argue that increased Sino-African economic relations export human rights violations as well (p. 59). The pessimistic school of thought labels China's increased trend in providing aid as 'rogue aid', coined and defined by Moisés Naím as "development assistance that is nondemocratic in origin and nontransparent in practice" (p. 95), implemented with the goal of undermining the attempts of Western conditional aid to foster political reform (Campbell, 2008, p. 92-93). Scholars of the pessimistic school believe that China is not acting as an alternative for African development, but rather as another self-interested global power whose priorities are its own advancement, and if needed, would place its economic needs above the humanitarian needs of African peoples to do so (Campbell, 2008, p. 99; Mason, 2017, p. 84).

On the other hand, the optimistic school of thought believes that the modern Sino-African relationship is a mutually beneficial partnership, providing African nations with an attractive alternative to Western hegemony (Power & Mohan, 2010, p. 462). These scholars cite evidence such as China's non-conditional 'no-strings-attached' aid, debt cancellations, infrastructure projects, and historical lack of participation in the Transatlantic Slave Trade or colonialism to present it in a positive light (Tull, 2006, p. 459; Zhao, 2014, p. 1034). The optimistic school accuses the pessimistic school of having a "one-sided interpretation of global order, in that Western dominance is seen as progressive and thus the only form of hegemony that matters historically and normatively" (Hirono & Suzuki, 2014, p. 451). Dean Coslovi even notes that it is "precisely because China's cultural and political values differ from those of the West that it is has been so readily received by nations of the developing world" (2018, p. 201). A large focus of the optimistic school is the hypocrisy of Western authors and politicians decrying China's

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involvement in Africa, given the negative track record of the United States and European countries in Africa.

Finally, the accommodative school of thought exists somewhere in between the two schools of thought above. It argues that this new nexus of Sino-African relations is a historical evolution (Alden & Alves, 2008, p. 43), and since African nations have no alternatives besides following the West or China, they must accommodate this new realm of globalization (Asongu & Aminkeng, 2013, p. 261). The accommodative school does not necessarily believe that China's involvement in Africa is of equal mutual benefit to both parties, but rather that it is a blend of imperialism and a new model of development from which African nations may truly benefit (Ovadia, 2013, p. 233). Even though China may be engaging in neo-colonialist practices, the accommodative school believes a developing nation may still find ways to benefit from an exploitative relationship, even if the situation is not ideal (Rich & Recker, 2013, p. 66).

Neo-Colonialism Conceptual Framework:

Since the beginning of the post-colonial period, descriptions of the way former colonial powers have maintained control over newly independent states through 'neo-colonialism' have circulated without much consensus on a concise, operationalized definition. Given that Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah's 1965 work, *Neo-Colonialism, the Last Stage of Imperialism*, originally popularized the term, this paper will operationalize a definition of neo-colonialism

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covering the descriptions and caveats given by Nkrumah of the new phenomenon he observed overtaking the developing world in the 1960s.

Neo-colonialism is a method of achieving the same benefits from the exploitation of developing countries that were previously achieved through colonialism (Nkrumah, 1965, para. 19). Neo-colonialism occurs through the use of economic, political, and cultural means to influence or control a dependent, although outwardly independent, country (Nkrumah, 1965, para. 2). While neo-colonialism may have the same goal as colonialism did before it, securing benefits for the colonial power at the expense of the colony, the difference is in the mechanism. Whereas colonial powers previously used their military as a means to conquer territories, neo-colonial powers must respect the nominal independence of the territories over which it intends to exercise control. Whereas colonialism was able to be overt in its intentions, neo-colonialism must be subtle and covert. As a result, economic, political, and cultural neo-colonialism are deployed against developing nations, however economic neo-colonialism is most frequently the weapon of choice. Therefore, we must differentiate the kinds of neo-colonialism not in terms of their content, but rather in terms of their purpose, whether they hope to influence the economic, political, or cultural structure of the targeted country.

Concept: Economic neo-colonialism:

A neo-colonialist power aims to maximize their economic benefits in their relationship with a neo-colonized nation. This can be accomplished through high levels of trade of cheaper

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natural resources and primary products from the neo-colonized nation and expensive, manufactured products from the neo-colonialist nation (Nkrumah, 1965, para. 3). Tied aid is frequently used to exercise economic neo-colonialism, where developed nations, historically Western states, offer aid programmes in exchange for that aid being used to purchase products from the donor country (Nkrumah, 1965, para. 24).

Aid is often used as a method to ensure the continued dependency of a neo-colonized nation on the donor. Rather than fulfilling the stated purpose of assisting in development until the neo-colonized country becomes more self-sustaining, aid programmes have acted largely to keep neo-colonized countries dependent and stagnant. Nkrumah details this paradox in his book. Neo-colonialism is the victim of its own contradictions. In order to make it attractive to those upon whom it is practiced it must be shown as capable of raising their living standards, but the economic objective of neo-colonialism is to keep those standards depressed in the interest of the developed countries. It is only when this contradiction is understood that the failure of innumerable 'aid' programmes, many of them well intentioned, can be explained. (Nkrumah, 1965, para. 24).

Capital from developed countries enter Africa's markets and countries in different forms, from foreign direct investment (FDI), to Official Development Assistance (ODA). In this complex environment, it is necessary to determine the motivation of the aid in order to determine its purpose. For example, tied aid, mentioned above, acts as a "revolving credit, paid by the

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colonial master, passing through the neo-colonial State and returning to the neo-colonial masters in the form of increased profits” (Nkrumah, 1965, para. 25). This kind of aid serves not only to gain profits from the neo-colonized country, but also to develop a trade monopoly in that country, and by extension, a sphere of influence.

Concept: Political neo-colonialism:

By political means, a neo-colonialist power aims to gain political benefits or further control over a neo-colonized country’s political structure. This can involve the placement of advisors in strategic positions in a neo-colonized country’s government, interference in a country’s political system to the benefit of a chosen political leader, or more military means, such as agreements for military bases or troops stationed in a neo-colonized country (Nkrumah, 1965, para. 84). To obtain these political benefits a neo-colonialist power may intervene directly in a neo-colonized country’s political system or use economic incentives to gain political benefits. The use of an economic incentive does not necessarily mean that this should be termed economic neo-colonialism, as there are cases where economic incentives may be used to achieve political gains. Conditional aid is a prime example of this, as while the neo-colonized nation may be offered economic aid as part of the exchange, the conditions attached to this kind of aid are generally political in nature. The most common example of this kind of conditional aid is the International Monetary Fund’s Structural Adjustment Program, which provided aid in exchange for democratic reforms and the liberalization of a country’s market.

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Another goal of political neo-colonialism may be the creation of a bloc on the international stage. Nkrumah uses the example of the spread and containment of opposing camps in the Cold War. In his book, he states that neo-colonialism allows great powers to “export the social conflicts” of their countries (Nkrumah, 1965, para. 13). In the 1960s, huge swaths of previously colonized territories suddenly opened up as new ideological battlegrounds between external powers. As a result, these great powers used economic and military aid in an attempt to gain control over these territories, partly out of fear of the threat that their rival would do so first. A more modern example can be observed in the structure of the United Nations General Assembly, where each country has a vote and the support of a large bloc of countries such as the African Regional Group, which includes over 50 UN member states, can be crucial in ensuring support for measures to a given great power’s benefit. In conclusion, political neo-colonialism is the use of political or economic incentives to bolster a neo-colonialist state’s political interests abroad, generally against a rival state, or sometimes a more generalized ideological adversary.

Concept: Cultural neo-colonialism:

By cultural means, a neo-colonialist power aims to create a one-way cultural exchange and therefore sphere of influence over the neo-colonized nation in order to create a like-minded bloc to promote the neo-colonialist nation’s goals on the global stage. Cultural neo-colonialism can be seen as a subsidiary to political neo-colonialism as the two are closely tied. In macroscopic terms, the goals of cultural neo-colonialism are largely to reinforce the success of

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political neo-colonialism. If the general public of a neo-colonized country tends to agree with the values of a great power, then it is more likely that their political goals will align. The key difference between political and cultural neo-colonialism is the target audience, as political neo-colonialism aims to directly influence the state's government, while cultural neo-colonialism is aimed at the public of the neo-colonized state.

The key component of cultural neo-colonialism is that the exchange of values is strictly one way. Elements of cultural neo-colonialism could include cinema, media, news publications, ideologies, values, religions, ideas, and notably, propaganda. Kwame Nkrumah cites the United States Information Agency (USIA) as a clear example of cultural neo-colonialism, which he terms "psychological warfare". In the 1960s, the USIA could be found in around 120 branches in 100 countries, half of which were housed in Africa. It developed cinemas, libraries, radio programmes, newspapers, and magazines (Nkrumah, 1965, para. 89-104). As Nkrumah describes, their content "glorifies the U.S. while attempting to discredit countries with an independent foreign policy...in developing countries, the USIA actively tries to prevent expansion of national media of information so as itself to capture the market-place of ideas" (Nkrumah, 1965, para. 98). However, in this example, American values and culture could make their way into the everyday life of a given African country, the inverse is not the case.

The next section will analyze whether China is currently practicing any or all of the three branches of neo-colonialism: economic; political; or cultural.

Analysis: Economic neo-colonialism:

While aid originating from OECD member states has been stagnant or declining recently, China has been essential in enabling African countries to close gaps in funding (Zhao, 2014, p. 1037-1038). In terms of trade, raw materials are undeniably high on China's priority list in Africa, as exemplified by their most important trading partners being resource-rich countries, mainly oil producers (Tull, 2006, p. 465). Many of these countries enjoy trade surpluses with China, such as Equatorial Guinea, the Republic of Congo, and Angola, while countries with trade deficits with China are generally lacking in natural resources, such as Benin, Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, Liberia, and Morocco (Chen, 2016, p. 103).

Although it is evident that Sino-African trade depends greatly on raw materials, is not apparent whether Chinese engagement on the continent is substantially different from Western involvement, or whether it will lead to development (Tull, 2006, p. 471; Chen, 2016, p. 103). Chinese involvement in Africa has heavily featured concessionary loans, which are often used to finance large Chinese-owned infrastructure projects, and frequently paid back with raw materials (Zhao, 2014, p. 1038). Chinese trade with Africa has not reduced Africa's dependence on primary goods, such as oil, copper, ore, timber, and minerals, and China is often accused by Western scholars and politicians of dumping manufactured goods, such as textiles, into Africa in its place. There is a large discrepancy between Chinese imports from Africa and Chinese exports to Africa, especially in recent years, with the largest disparity being in 2015, when Chinese exports to Africa totaled 150.4 billion USD, over 388% higher than the value of its imports from Africa (CARI, 2019). This trend is causing fear that China will simply procure the resources it

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needs to develop while African economies will dry up without the natural resources to fuel their own development (Tull, 2006, p. 471; Zhao, 2014, p. 1042-1043). Dumping manufactured goods into the neo-colonized nation while extracting its primary goods is at the heart of a core-periphery style relationship, which is exactly how Nkrumah describes a neo-colonialist dynamic (1965, para. 21).

China's involvement in Africa also takes advantage of Western policies towards Africa in order to maximize its own economic benefits. Moisés Naím coined the term 'rogue aid' to describe China's non-conditional aid to authoritarian regimes, namely Sudan and Zimbabwe (2007, p. 95). China is not only the biggest importer of Sudanese oil but a major weapons supplier to the Sudanese government and militias fighting against rebels in the Darfur region (Zhao, 2014, p. 1039). In 2008, China vetoed sanctions against the Zimbabwe under Robert Mugabe's reign, aiding Chinese companies to secure deals in mining, defense, aviation, and agriculture (Zhao, 2014, p. 1040). Rogue aid allows China to circumvent competition over resources in a sanctioned area. To Beijing, this is a "highly advantageous status quo" (Tull, 2006, p. 470). From a Western perspective, however, this development is extremely concerning as it undercuts the threat of Western sanctions. China's investment without an added policy changes clause, makes the offer of Western investment a less enticing 'carrot' to effect positive change surrounding human rights violations under this regime (Hirono & Suzuki, 2014, p. 447)

China's indifference towards civil wars and human rights violations in the name of non-interference allows it to access territories that the West has closed off. Additionally, this indifference could also be seen as an indicator of China's short-term strategy on the continent. If China intended to secure long-term trading partners, then concern over what effects a civil war

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could have on its access to natural resources would be higher. However, if China is focusing on short-term rewards, then “investment in Africa should be directed more at resource extraction and quick profits than sustainability” (Rich & Recker, 2013, p. 62).

Another area in which Chinese companies appear to be taking advantage of African economies for short-term gain is in their exploitation of Western strategies for African development, such as the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) and the Agreement on Textiles and Clothing of the Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). The purpose of the AGOA is to give some African states preferential access to American markets, while the Agreement on Textiles and Clothing was created to protect European and American markets from cheap imports from Asia (Tull, 2006, p. 471; Campbell, 2008, p. 91). The combined effect of the AGOA and the Agreement on Textiles and Clothing saw the rise of Chinese textile companies in many southern and eastern African countries such as South Africa, Kenya, and Lesotho, as manufacturers hoped to lower labor costs and find easier export routes to American markets (Zhao, 2014, p. 1046; Tull, 2006, p. 471-472). However, when the Agreement on Textiles and Clothing expired in 2005 and restrictions on Asian textiles were removed, the African textile boom quickly crashed as Chinese companies immediately began moving back to China (Tull, 2006, p. 472). Once these companies were no longer able to exploit the benefits of American and European development programs, they became uninterested in continuing to invest in their respective communities.

The most recent trend in the Sino-African economic relationship has been the inclusion of several African countries in the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and the concerns over the possibility that China is setting so-called ‘debt traps’ across the developing world

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(Chellaney, 2017). It is too soon to say what the future of these large infrastructure projects will be – debt trap or not – especially with the added stress and uncertainty of economic crises caused by ripple effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Regardless, the mounting debt owed by African nations to China is reaching mountainous levels, making it concerning no matter the creditor in question (Moore, 2018, para. 6).

China's economic relationship with Africa has not changed the reliance of most countries on export raw materials, suggesting a lack of development towards manufacturing or service industries. On the other hand, China has managed to use Africa to its own advantage, particularly by working around Western policies designed to develop the continent, such as the AGOA or sanctions against regimes such as those in Sudan and Zimbabwe. The status quo in Africa has been extremely beneficial to China, and less so to African countries themselves.

Analysis: Political neo-colonialism:

China's ventures into Africa have always been fueled not only by economic interests, but political ones. When the People's Republic of China (PRC) first engaged with African states, it was with the goal of undoing the spell of isolation placed on it by the West, and advancing the One China Policy's competition for diplomatic recognition with Taiwan (Hirono & Suzuki, 2014, p. 443; Rich & Recker, 2013, p. 63). This policy succeeded in bringing the PRC to the world stage, as African countries were instrumental in making the PRC a member state of the UN and the UN Security Council (Coslovi, 2018, p. 196). Similarly, when China returned to

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Africa in the 1990s, it was a result of being cut off from the rest of the developed world after the Tiananmen Square Massacre (Taylor, 1998, p. 447). In these ways, China established a tradition of using economic incentives to gain political benefits on the African continent.

While military involvement is usually associated with colonialism rather than neo-colonialism, military benefits allow a neo-colonialist country to extend its influence in an area and they therefore, as Nkrumah sees it, fall under the umbrella of political benefits (Nkrumah, 1965). To that end, China has slowly begun to include military involvement in its Africa Policy. China has been militarily involved in Africa with a strong peacekeeping presence and a naval force off the coast of the Horn of Africa to fight Somali pirates (Chen, 2016, p. 106-107; Tull, 2006, p. 475). In 2017, China opened its first overseas military base in Djibouti to support this effort, even though opening an overseas base was something they had repeatedly claimed they would never do (Brautigam, 2020, p. 4). If rumors of future bases in the Seychelles, Kenya, Tanzania, Namibia, Angola, and Nigeria come to fruition, this should be seen as an extremely important trend, and an attempt by China to extend control over Africa as a sphere of influence (Chen, 2016, p. 106-107).

In the past, China has used economic and military aid to secure the leaders it preferred in newly independent African countries by tying their independence struggles with larger, socialist, anti-imperialist struggles. It also used non-conditional aid to secure its sphere of influence and advance the One China Policy, culminating in the 1971 UN General Assembly vote which admitted China into the United Nations (Coslovi, 2018, p. 196). Today, China continues its use of non-conditional aid to present itself as an attractive alternative to Western development and

inspire popularity of its Beijing Model. 2017 marked a large step forward in terms of expanding their sphere of influence as China opened its first overseas military base in Djibouti.

Analysis: Cultural neo-colonialism:

In cultural terms, Beijing is rapidly expanding its outreach to African peoples. This includes a network of Chinese media outlets, training programs, language classes, and cultural centers (Zhao, 2014, p. 1037). The success of these policies is clear as across the continent public opinion has shifted away from the West and towards the Chinese alternative (Moyo, 2010, para. 28-29). Surveys such as the Afrobarometer consistently find that critical opinions of China are outnumbered in almost every African country by two to one, and that China is “almost universally viewed as having a more beneficial impact on African countries than does the United States” (Moyo, 2010, para. 28-29). Rhetoric of South-South cooperation has reinforced the idea that China and Africa share similar values such as non-interference and mutual benefit, allowing China to spin Western criticism of Chinese behavior as trying to intervene in and impede Chinese and African development (Alden & Alves, 2008, p. 47-52).

There is clear evidence that the Sino-African cultural exchange is very one-sided. While African students take advantage of the opportunities afforded by the cheaper alternative to American or British schools that China offers, even Chinese workers and officials in Africa do not seem to take initiative in a two-way cultural exchange (Zhao, 2014, p. 1037). Chinese workers in Africa tend to isolate themselves from the local populations, and therefore have no

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“incentives or opportunities to learn about local languages and cultures” (Zhao, 2014, p. 1044). As for Chinese officials, even those espousing the benefits of cultural exchanges have trouble following through. For example, when President Hu paid a visit to Mauritius in 2009, his rhetorical focus was on cultural exchange (Zhao, 2014, p. 1044). However, instead of engaging in or attempting to learn about Mauritian culture, Hu visited a Chinese cultural center and spoke of the benefits of “what Africans can learn from China and Chinese culture” (Zhao, 2014, p.1044). This shows that China is clearly only interested in injecting its culture and values into African countries, and not learning about diverse African cultures and values. While espousing a South-South relationship, China clearly has a very specific view of who should be leading this dynamic.

Conclusion:

While the Sino-African relationship may not represent cooperation with Africa, in the context of a competition between Western powers and China over influence on the continent, it presents an alternative development model for Africa. China’s involvement has not greatly changed Africa’s dependence on the export of primary goods, however the optics of a cooperative South-South relationship, non-conditional aid, and infrastructure projects allow China to present itself as an attractive alternative to Western conditional aid. As a result, China’s involvement in Africa may not be seen as wholly positive, but simply better than the alternative. By providing a marginal improvement in the standard of living, or at least having the optics of

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doing so, China is able to present its Beijing Model as the correct path forward for African development, and it seems this is taking hold. This paper argues that there is clear evidence China is practicing economic, political, and cultural neo-colonialism in its modern relationship with Africa, based on Kwame Nkrumah's 1965 definition. With the added uncertainties of the future of the Belt and Road Initiative in Africa, the possibility of debt traps, as well as the far-reaching consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, what remains to be seen is whether China's neo-colonialism will be better or worse for Africa than Western neo-colonialism.

What can be said with some degree of certainty is that if African political leaders move towards a Beijing Model of development, it will result in important consequences for the strength of Western notions of democracy that have been promoted in Africa since the decolonization period. If the correct way forward for development follows the footsteps of the Beijing Model, rather than the Washington Consensus, democratic ideals and political rights will undeniably take a backseat across the developing world.

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