

# Politics of knowledge production around China–Africa relations

China–Africa Economic Interactions: Past, Present, and Future Conference  
12 –13 September 2024

Frangton Chiyemura and Meryl Burgess

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# Introduction

- ▶ Since the early 2000s, relationship between Africans and Chinese has matured
- ▶ Proliferation of discourses/ narratives/assumptions evidently influencing how engagements play out on the ground, as well as how knowledge is produced across different scales
- ▶ 3 scholarship camps have emerged:
  - ▶ Chinese centric analysis of the relations (normally associated with the view that China is driving the relations with African countries) (Lee, 2022; Strange, 2023).
  - ▶ The 'African agency turn'— interested in understanding how the 'Africans' are influencing and shaping their relations with China (Corkin, 2013; Gadzala, 2015; Mohan and Lampert, 2012).
  - ▶ A more pragmatic approach foregrounding how the relations are intertwined and co-determined (Batchelor, 2022; Yan and Zheng, 2021; Fasan, 2021).
- ▶ As the relations between China and Africa continue to grow, questions about knowledge production are emerging.

## Introduction continued...

- ▶ Proliferation of relations between China and Africa directly correlates with increased production of knowledge, some of which though conceived in “imperial metanarratives that in most cases obfuscate local perspectives and alternative ways” (Lee, 2021, p.230).
- ▶ Linked to this, “power and location shape our relationship to knowledge production” (Zheng et al, 2021, p. 119).
- ▶ Lee (2021, p. 230) “European colonial past presently haunts our understanding of China and Africa relations.”
- ▶ Dearth of scholarship presently that focus on the politics of knowledge production in the context of China and Africa relations.
- ▶ We examine the politics of knowledge production in the context of China and Africa relations through an attempt to engage with the question of what knowledge is being produced, by whom and with what political implications.

# Why does this matter really

- We recognise that knowledge production is inherently political.
- There are ideological, geopolitical and geoeconomic factors that weigh in on what, how, why and when specific forms of knowledge(s) are produced (Mohan, 2008).
- Exploring the political landscape of knowledge production surrounding China and Africa relations is crucial and echoes Nyanhoga's (2014 p. 37) call to examine "how knowledge production and dissemination operate within specific political trajectories."
- It matters because it illuminates the interplay between politics, perceptions, and their subsequent impact on power dynamics, representation, local agency, policy decisions, investment choices, and public opinion.
- It also transcends stereotypical Western perspectives and cultivate a space for mutual understanding, recognising the diverse voices and interests within China, Africa, and the global community.
- This is a more constructive and inclusive knowledge production ecosystem.

# Framing the politics of knowledge production

- ▶ We define knowledge production as the process involved in and the ultimate output of producing scholarly work in the form of Books, Book Chapters, Journal Articles, and Review Articles
- ▶ We propose 'knowledge production imperialism' as an analytical framework
- ▶ We draw from work of Syed Hussein Alatas on 'intellectual imperialism' and conceptually engages his idea of the domination of 'one people' by another in their world of thinking and the political implications associated with that (Alatas, 2021, p. 10; 2000, p. 24).
- ▶ We question who is generating large outputs of research in the form of scholarly work published, and whose ideas and information contained in these works has the ability to influence the knowledge production of other countries due to the consumption of the works originating in these geographic spaces.
- ▶ We systematically review work published between 2010 and 2023 around China and Africa engagements, indexed in the Scopus curated database.
- ▶ Scopus database contains the largest number of publications on the subject and also tend to "standardise bibliographical references and other information in the publications (source and type of document, author affiliation), allowing the applicability of bibliometric techniques" (Felipini and Palludeto, 2018, p. 1).

# Contemporary discourses on knowledge production

- ▶ Since the European renaissance times, knowledge production has been subjectively seen as something the West (US\*, UK, and some parts of Europe) has hegemony on.
- ▶ Though times have changed, the way knowledge is produced and who is considered the epicentre of knowledge production remains unfortunately seen as the West.
- ▶ Syed Hussein Alatas (2000, p. 24) thus developed concepts such as intellectual imperialism which refers to the domination of “one people” in their world of thinking.
- ▶ S.H. Alatas (2000) believed that not only was there direct political, social and economic imperialism, but there was also “domination” in terms of thought because of how knowledge was produced, and by whom.
- ▶ In universities, we see this where academic curriculums are still based on Western ideas, theories and structures, emphasizing the dominance of Western perspectives.
- ▶ In research and academic publishing, highest-ranked journals (primarily based in the Global North) continue to publish authors from the same institutions or regions; and where forms of gatekeeping are applied in order to maintain the status quo.
- ▶ S.H. Alatas (2000, p. 23-24) writes about traits of imperialism - exploitation, conformity and the dominated people playing a secondary role.

# Contemporary discourses on knowledge production

- ▶ Exploitation— data is collected from developing regions and informants (Research Assistants) are used
- ▶ Data is processed into publications in developed countries: “empirical work comes from the ‘third world’ but research agenda, theoretical perspectives and methods from the west” (Alatas, 2022, p. 19).
- ▶ Thus, the West is seen as often determining the nature of what knowledge is produced (Kuwayam & Bremen, 1997) and what discussions gets attention or becomes influential.
- ▶ Due to their power and influence, universities and ‘well-known’ scholars in the Global North can determine what knowledge is produced and what constitutes good research (Jeater, 2018: 9).
- ▶ While intellectual imperialism in the colonial era was more direct, contemporary Western control manifests through the ‘global flow of social scientific knowledge’ rather than direct institutional dominance (Alatas, 2008, p. 9).
- ▶ Linked to this is academic dependency – a condition in which the knowledge production of certain scholarly communities are conditioned by the development and growth of knowledge of other scholarly communities to which the former is subjected.
- ▶ Dependency on the media of ideas [published words and who owns them] as well as “dependency on recognition of works”, particularly in terms of citations (Alatas, 2022, p. 19–20).
- ▶ Ultimately, we see this in major journal publications in the North where the impact factor and metrics of journals “influence whose understandings and interpretations of the world are viewed as significant and relevant” (Jeater, 2018: 11).

# Knowledge production around China–Africa relations

- ▶ For years, some western media outputs and scholars have set the tone of discussion and debates regarding China's engagement with Africa, often framing China negatively, while viewing Africa as without much agency or power.
- ▶ China's involvement in Africa is frequently characterised as a new 'Scramble for Africa' (Ofidile, 2008; Carmody, 2011; Ewalefoh, 2021) or a neocolonial endeavour, portraying Africa solely as the recipient of exploitative practices.
- ▶ Chinese loans and the consequent 'debt trap diplomacy'.
- ▶ Similarly, the 'Dragon' metaphor (Yu, 1968) attributes a predatory nature to China's role in Africa (Jiang, 2009; Myuni, 2011; Ylönen, 2020; Lee, 2021).
- ▶ For instance, Economist articles published between 2019–2021 reflects 'wider processes of Westernisation' and resonates with the 'scramble for Africa' narrative, emphasizing African indebtedness to China, resource transactions, and the perceived "controlling effect of the Belt and Road Initiative" (Obeng-Odoom's, 2024, p. 1003).
- ▶ These repetitive focus reinforces specific images and perpetuates "imperial" or "neocolonialist" interpretations of the relationship.
- ▶ Scholars have begun questioning processes of knowledge production and its inherent gatekeeping mechanisms. For instance, who has the right to speak for Africa or China, and whose voices are recognized, who is funding this research, who gets the funding and who is producing what forms of knowledge?

# knowledge production around China–Africa relations

- ▶ Research funding and resources seem to be more concentrated and exclusively Western, Chinese to some extent with the inclusion of a few African collaborators (Huynh, 2021).
- ▶ Zheng et al., (2021) structural form of gatekeeping prevents African based scholars to be leading experts in this field.
- ▶ Lower acceptance rates of African authors; they are also systematically cited less than others (Briggs and Weathers 2016, p: 466).
- ▶ Scholars from the Global South are subjected to more detailed processes in order to access research funds and they have to frequently justify the value of their research and “contextualize” their findings.
- ▶ Research from the Global North is the parameter against which “ours” is compared, measured, and defined” (Engel & Becerra, 2018 in Mutsvairo, et al., 2022: 4).
- ▶ This clearly shows that the landscape of knowledge production surrounding China and Africa relations is inherently political.

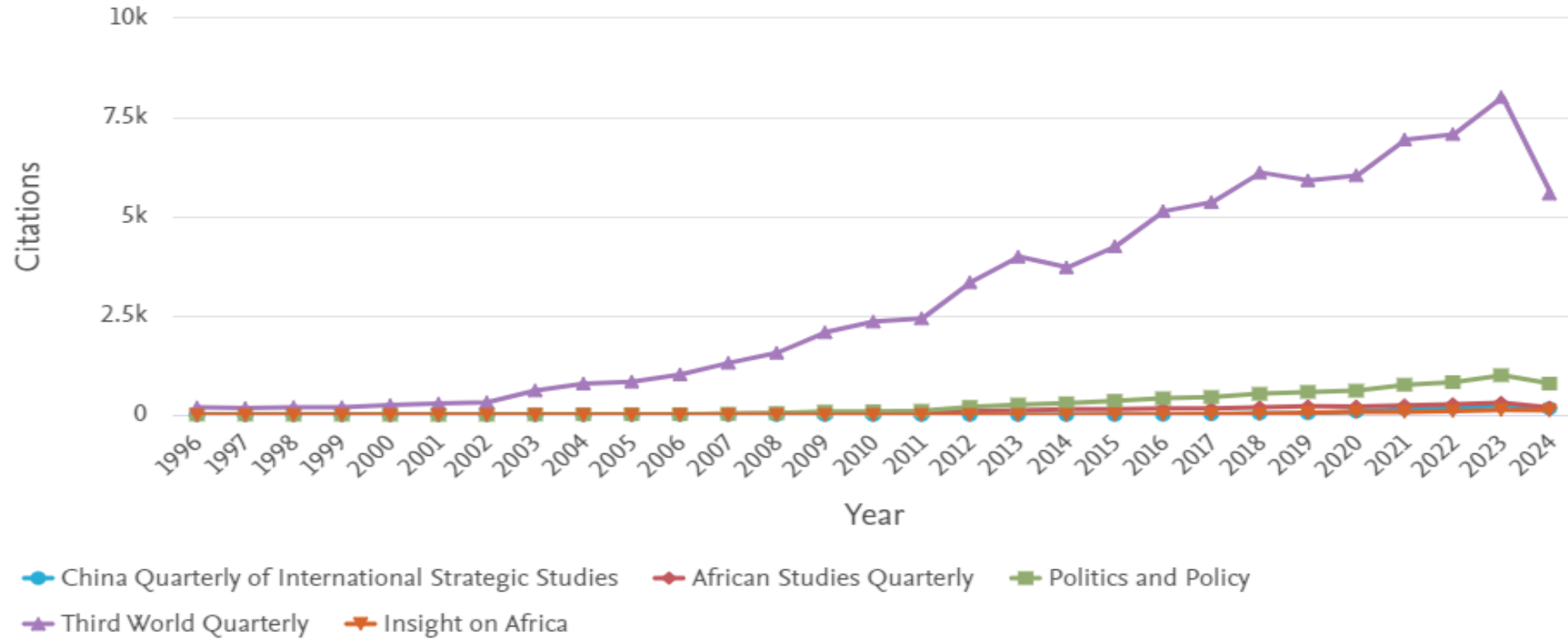
# Data and methods

- ▶ We employ a methodical review and content analysis approach in which we systematically performed a textual analysis of scholarly work published between 2010 and 2023 around Africa-China engagements, indexed in the Scopus curated database
- ▶ We develop our dataset based on a search entry consisting of at least one of the following reference in their titles, abstracts or key-words "China/Sino/Beijing\* Africa\* /engagement\*/relations"/
- ▶ The search yielded 339 documents: 213 Articles, 71 Book Chapters, 24 Books, and 19 Review articles.
- ▶ **Scholarly work type:** Books, Book Chapters, Journal Articles and Review articles– because we wanted to understand the forms in which scholarly work is being published in.
- ▶ **Author institutional affiliation:** we reviewed author institutional affiliation because we wanted to establish the geographical location of the authors. However, we recognised that there are instances where some authors are multi-located and, in that case, we chose the first mentioned institutional affiliation location. There are also instances where there are co-authors who are equally multi-located. Again, we followed the same protocol.
- ▶ **Documents by funding source** (declared funder of the project). Here, we wanted to establish who is funding the research. If there was no declared funder, then the articles will not meet inclusion criteria and will be taken out of the dataset.

# Results

Source citations by year

☐ Exclude source self citations



Calculations last updated: 10 Sep 2024

# Some considerations

- What we consider to be the literature on China and Africa relations used in this presentation is only that taken from Scopus for period 2010 to 2023.
- We cannot exclude possible errors, omissions and other issues in the nature of bibliographic data we used for this analysis.
- Majority of African based scholars might be widely publishing but not in mainstream journals or those at least curated by Scopus.
- We focus on scholarly work published in English only.
- However, Scopus contains the largest number of publications and also tend to standardise bibliographical references.

# Concluding remarks

- We have made an attempt to gain an understanding around the politics of knowledge production on China-Africa relations
- Knowledge production ecosystem is currently skewed in favour of the West (broadly generalised here) and existing bottlenecks makes it difficult for a pluriversal knowledge production around China-Africa relations
- Generated new insights by organising and synthesising existing knowledge on this dynamic relationship.
- However, this is still work in progress....
- Appreciate your comments/suggestions

**Thank you**