

Beyond 'China-in-Africa' Narratives

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**African-Asian Encounters:
New Cooperations
and New Dependencies**

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African-Asian Encounters draws readers' attention to a broad range of engagements between African and Asian countries, addressing the monopolization of China-in-Africa narratives in both media and scholarly works. With a range of studies examining previously obscured interactions, activities, and migration flows – including linkages between Vietnam and Angola, South Korea and Rwanda, and Asian artisanal gold mining in Cameroon, as well as African student and professional athletes in Malaysia and the Philippines – the volume opens new doors of inquiry into the effects of continued global encounters.

A much needed antidote

African-Asian Encounters is one of a number of new publications and broader research endeavors, which aim to address and counter the dominance of 'China-Africa' on the academic landscape. This book and another forthcoming edited volume¹ originate from a series of conferences organized by the Africa's Asian Options (AFRASO) research project of Goethe University in Frankfurt in partnership with local host universities. The book is based on a selection of papers from the first AFRASO conference, which was held in collaboration with the Africa-Asia Development University Network and the Centre for Civilisational Dialogue at the University of Malaya, and focuses on the establishment and evaluation of new forms of African-Asian cooperation.

In addition to the AFRASO publications, Routledge has also recently published *The Routledge Handbook of Asia-Africa Relations* (Raposo, Arase, and Cornelissen, 2018) and Palgrave Macmillan published *Migration and Agency in a Globalizing World. Afro-Asian Encounters* (Cornelissen and Mine, 2018). Taken together, these publications provide a valuable and much needed antidote to the continued reign and distorting dominance of 'China-Africa' literature in the broader fields of China Studies, Africa Studies, Global Studies, and South-South discourses. In addition to introducing readers to a wide(r) range of actors and a diversity of engagements between Africa and Asia, the continent-to-continent pairing brings greater balance to what has always troubled me (even as one of the early scholars in the still growing China-Africa sub-field) about the asymmetrical pairing of the China (a country) and Africa (a continent).

While there are still an infinite number of topics worthy of further research in the study of China-Africa, *African-Asian Encounters* serves as a reminder that the narrow focus on China's engagements in Africa obscures a multitude of actors, encounters, and different ways of conceptualizing these. In this volume topics range from African youth in Malaysia (Röschenthaler, chapter one) and African students and professional athletes in the Philippines (Rehal, chapter eight) to Chinese and Koreans involved in artisanal and small-scale mining in Cameroon, Vietnamese contract workers in Angola, and South Korean civil society actors in the Rwandese

countryside (see below for more on these). One section of the book does, in fact, cover the 'Chinese Factor', which is impossible to ignore in many African countries; this section includes a chapter on Confucius Institutes (Hartig, chapter three), another on civil society interactions (Mageza-Barthel, chapter four), and the chapter on Vietnamese and Chinese labor flows to Angola. Chapter six, by Engel, is a bit of an outlier as it examines Indonesia's South-South cooperation strategies with only sporadic mention of Africa.

Some unevenness

As with most edited volumes there is some unevenness. In a volume such as this, which is based on a global conference of international participants from a wide range of scholarly disciplines (and attendant research methodologies) writing about a diversity of topics, one has the sense of strolling through a large art museum with various types of art (Impressionist, Abstract, Portraits, Still Lifes, Landscapes, etc.) from different periods. As with the art museum, some pieces are more to one's taste than others; some resonate, while others are not as approachable or comprehensible. One small example of the latter, for me, would be the tables in chapter two, which, for anyone without some statistics background, are essentially illegible.

Edited volumes such as this really depend on the introductory and concluding chapters to really tie the book together thematically and/or conceptually. In my view, this is unfortunately the greatest downfall of the book. The Introduction is a missed opportunity to really lay out all of the Africa-Asia scholarly activities recently undertaken – by AFRASO; by the Stellenbosch/Doshisha (Cornelissen and Mine)-led efforts; and by the Association of Asian Studies in Africa (A-ASiA) group with support from the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) and the International Congress of Asian Studies (ICAS) – in order to make a stronger case for this more balanced way of examining, continent-to-continent, relations and engagements. While the Introduction starts with a critique of the limitations of the dominant China-Africa frame, the authors don't go far enough. The book also lacks a conclusion, which, again, could have been a chance to tie the disparate chapters together.

'Other' Asian actors in Africa

That said, I found most of the chapters to be chock full of new material and fascinating insights. As a migration scholar, I was particularly drawn to the chapters that focused on various Asian actors in Cameroon, Rwanda, and Angola as well as the two chapters that covered African students and athletes in Malaysia and the Philippines, so the remainder of this review will focus on the migrant-centered chapters. I was pleasantly surprised by how much I learned in these chapters. For example, I had no idea that there were so many South Koreans engaged in mining in Angola (chapter two by Nguiepjou and Runge) and development activities in Rwanda (chapter seven by Nauta and Lee).

And Groger and Klump's chapter (five) was the first I had heard of the Vietnamese contract workers in Angola. Part of my ignorance of these 'other' Asian actors in Africa may well stem from the very dominance of the 'China-in-Africa narratives' that this volume addresses. Confusion also arises from the general sense in most of Africa that any person from Asia (including this Korean American reviewer) is seen and described as 'Chinese'. That said, it is interesting that Nguiepjou and Runge's research indicates that locals in Cameroon were, in fact, able to differentiate between the Korean and Chinese migrants involved in mining activities. It is also significant that most of these Asian actors are relative newcomers to Africa, having arrived in significant numbers after 2000, indicating that, perhaps, the literature has not yet caught up with these new(ish) developments. The arrival of more and more actors from other Asian countries in Africa will hopefully begin to dispel these instances of mistaken identity/identification and general conflation with China/Chinese.

South Korean state and independent actors in both Cameroon and Angola, as described in chapters two and seven, are clearly working at setting themselves apart from the Chinese (as well as other actors). Some of the themes that arise in the China-Africa literature are mirrored in this volume, such as, for example, the African government responses to various Asian actors or the South Koreans playing up their lack of colonial past with African partner countries (just as the Chinese do). But many of the details uncovered by the research described in these two chapters, including Korean development and business practices, the marketing of the controversial *Saemaul Undong* program, Korean government initiatives for Africa's development, and Korea-Africa Forum meetings, help to put the China-Africa engagements in greater perspective and provide further evidence that we have entered a multipolar world. Similarly, the fascinating details of Vietnamese-Angolan relations, Vietnamese construction entrepreneurs and migration brokers, and the complex (and quasi-legal) processes of Chinese companies selling their labor migration quotas to Vietnamese labor contractors do much to dispel narrow China-Africa narratives. This chapter may, in fact, be the first publication to 'out' these sorts of practices in Africa and provide details into the mostly hidden but surprisingly large flows of Vietnamese workers to Angola.

African travelers

The two chapters that focus on Africans in Malaysia and the Philippines also offer fascinating insights into flows that have not been much discussed in the broader literature. Both Röschenthaler's and Rehal's discussions about African students in Malaysia and the Philippines, respectively, add to the growing body of work on African migrants in China. Both reveal changes in the flows and trajectories of international students to new, non-Western, non-traditional education destinations as well as some of the problems with these international education programs. Röschenthaler, in particular, provides incredibly rich and thick descriptions of the African students based on her ethnographic work in Malaysia including the students' encounters with racism and their survival strategies in an increasingly unfriendly setting reminiscent of the work of Haugen and other scholars of Africans in China.² Rehal's discussion of the semi-professional and professional African footballers and track & field athletes, while not as richly detailed, introduces readers to new actors. These mostly young African travelers are exploring non-traditional paths to non-Western destinations that have, until relatively recently, remained relatively unstudied.

In all, the edited volume is a welcome addition to the small but growing field of literature that returns the gaze to the wider Africa-Asian relations, in the spirit of Bandung, looking beyond the dominance of the 'China-in-Africa' narratives and bringing our gaze to a multiplicity of smaller but nonetheless important new Asian actors and engagements with a range of African countries.

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Notes

- 1 Anthony, R. & Ruppert, U. (eds) (forthcoming) *Re-thinking African-Asian Encounters: Changing Realities – Changing Concepts*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- 2 Haugen, H.Ø. 2012. 'Nigerians in China: A Second State of Immobility', *International Migration* 50(2):65-80; Haugen, H.Ø. 2013. 'China's recruitment of African university students: Policy efficacy and unintended outcomes', *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 11(3): 315-334.

