

Correcting My Myopia on Africa-Asia Relations

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I was not sure what to expect when I was generously invited to cover the Third Africa-Asia: A New Axis of Knowledge Conference-Festival as a journalist. This would be my first visit to Francophone Africa, and indeed to Senegal. I felt positively puzzled when I looked at a program promising over 130 sessions, with over 700 participants presenting in at least three languages. What could I possibly make of such a bounty of knowledge, debates, people, connections, and ideas?



Fig. 1 (left): Natural Dyes workshop at the IFAN Museum of African Arts. (Photo by Pierre Deperouges, 2025)

Fig. 2 (middle): Panel session in the Faculty of Medicine during AA3. (Photo by Pierre Deperouges, 2025)

Fig. 3 (below): AA3 opening ceremony. (Photo by Pierre Deperouges, 2025)

The event took place in mid-June 2025 over four days at the University of Cheikh Anta Diop (UCAD) in several buildings dispersed over the large campus in central Dakar, right on the ocean shore. The geography of the place mirrored what at first seemed a vast collection of unrelated topics: music, agriculture, gender, urbanization, food, migration, architecture, film, research methodology, climate change, linguistics, martial arts, real estate. But as I zigzagged across the campus, and sampled over 20 panels, embedded myself in conversations at coffee and lunch breaks, checked websites of projects and videos, something began to emerge: African-Asian interconnectivity. A much more diverse story than the over-covered story of China in Africa. A story that develops outside of state-sponsored frames. As this idea sunk in and kept me thinking and researching, I asked myself: But why are those stories of hybridity, innovation, and South-South exchanges not told outside of academia?

My background is in post-Soviet and China studies, and I visited the continent for the first time in 2012, travelling to Kenya from Beijing, where I had been based for six years. Back then, I had designed a 10-day long field trip for Chinese media and environmental professionals to meet Kenyan peers and to hear for themselves about perceptions of Chinese presence in an East African context. Also serving as an interpreter, I was often in the middle of conversations that showed a mix of genuine curiosity, mutual lack of knowledge, and a good measure of deeply ingrained prejudice on both sides.

This project coincided with a time when in China, Africa was amply discussed in media, at conferences, and in governmental speeches as an option for a sudden advancement in one's career, leaving me with the impression that China in Africa amounted to most of Asia's presence on the continent.

Then came Dakar in June 2025 and with it, a healthy exercise of correcting my knowledge myopia. I rapidly came to the conclusion I had to consider new perspectives. China is just one of the many Asian players in Africa, and while the relationship remains largely asymmetric in favor of Asia, Africans are also present in Asia, and when so, not just in China.

Africa-Asia: Thinking beyond China

China in Africa has become a trope in academia and media to the point that it marginalizes the role other regions and countries play: South Asia, Southeast Asia, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan. This in itself is partially a consequence of a Global North-centric view of the continent: European nations invaded and occupied almost the entire African continent, and developed a colonial view with claims of political and economic ownership that remains to this day. The Soviet Union was the first to truly challenge Western influence during the Cold War but its power quickly disappeared in the late 1980s. Today, the only true competitor is China, which became significant in the late 1990s. The obsession with the country that "is replacing us" – meaning the West – has led to

a hypertrophy disregarding what other Asian countries are doing in Africa, even if China remains the major Asian actor given the levels of investments and large-scale projects, and the number of its citizens living in Africa.

Indeed, some of the most interesting panels I participated in discussed competition between North and South Korea in African projects and Japanese economic collaboration dating back to the 1920s in certain cases. South Asia also has a long historical presence going back to the 18th century, mostly through Western enslavement and trade routes. Today this history is represented by significant South Asian communities on the continent; in some countries such as Mauritius, 70 percent of the population is of South Asian origin. In South Africa, they account for about 1.5 million people.

India-Africa is another vital and growing venue: Trade is estimated at around US\$100 billion and expected to double by 2030. India is a major investor in infrastructure projects,

and it plays an important role in South-South exchanges as a member of the BRICS. More importantly, at least 25,000 Africans are studying in India.

Southeast Asia is also present historically and even linguistically: Malagasy takes its roots in the same language family as Malay and Indonesian. Wax fabrics, widely worn across Africa, originate in the Indonesian tradition of batik. Today, Vietnam, Singapore, and Indonesia are the leading trade partners and investors from the region in Africa. But beyond the economic partnership, there is a growing sense of a shared history of colonialism, migration (including under colonialism), and political solidarity that is feeding new conversations and partnerships inspired by the awareness of a similar experience, and by certain shared conditions of political and economic development.

Africans have always invested in Asian geographies

There can be no doubt the Africa-Asia relationship tilts in favor of Asia: investment and infrastructure projects are all Asian and take place in Africa; Asia's trade with Africa remains dominated by extraction of natural resources; Asian modern technology is imported from Asia and dominates African markets; there are more Asians in Africa than vice versa; and more Africans learn Asian languages – mostly Chinese – than Asians study non-colonial African languages.

But this asymmetry, raised frequently in discussions at the AA3 ConFest in

"AA3 was an extremely enriching experience. It brought together academics, artists, and activists. Locating AA3 in Dakar was also a great decision, as it allowed participants to explore a city rich in culture, tradition and intellectual activity from a renowned African university."



Fig. 4 (above): UCAD Student Volunteers. (Photo by Pierre Deperouges, 2025)



Fig. 5 (left): Book Donation Campaign at UCAD Central Library. (Photo by Khadiyatou Sene, 2025)

Fig. 6 (top far right): 40+9 Performance by Viet Le, Yoro Diallo, and Demba Ndiaye. (Photo by Pierre Deperouges, 2025)

Fig. 7 (below far right): Workshop at AA3. (Photo by Pierre Deperouges, 2025)



“My time at the Africa-Asia conference was very enriching first of all intellectually, I attended excellent panels, sessions and workshops. The way the conference encouraged delegates to navigate the city and attend events outside of campus, as well as learning more about the history fo the campus helped ground the academic discussions in the local context of the conference and gave me a chance to develop my knowledge of Dakar, a City I had seen mostly in films. The different performances, exhibitions, tours and workshops that the conference proposed allowed me to meet colleagues in a friendly environment and atmosphere and my exchanges were very candid and stimulating. It's a fit to organise such an event and I very much look forward to attending the next Africa-Asia conference.”

Dakar as something to acknowledge and challenge, does not mean Africans are not present in Asia. In fact, their presence has long historical roots from black samurais in feudal Japan to police officials in early modern South Asia. Today, this presence is diversifying and generating a renewed interest in Asia among Africans.

Historically, trade, food, and religion have been avenues of intense exchanges where traces of African presence can be identified and are indeed studied across disciplines. Today African students, small-scale traders, performing artists, and athletes represent some of the most active communities living in Asia. In the case of Japan, where population decrease requires the import of foreign labor, particularly in the manufacturing and service

industries, an estimated 10,000 to 20,000 West Africans, mostly from Ghana and Nigeria, are working, living, developing their own community, and intermarrying with Japanese people.

Looking away from mega projects: Africa-Asia is guided by unusual individuals

Having established that Africa-Asia connections go way beyond the story of China in Africa, I was ready for my second myopia correction: some of the deepest encounters between the two continents are not the initiatives of state or large business actors, but

are in fact imagined, led, and lived by unusual individuals who often remain unknown or little-known to outsiders of the communities where African-Asian encounters happen.

The narrative about Asian presence in Africa is dominated by large projects in a language of finance and development that rarely tells individual stories. The reality is that many of the encounters linking the two continents are unique individual stories that ignore, or bypass, or counter official state and corporate decisions and projects.

One example that embodies this is the thriving Vietnamese community in Angola, now estimated at 40,000 people, who moved individually and through family networks to open mostly car repair shops, hairdressing salons, and restaurants. The community has its own local celebrity, Pham Quang Linh, a YouTuber with four million subscribers who showcases the life of Vietnamese people in Angola. In fact, he became so popular that he has been co-opted by the Vietnamese government as one of the members of the Vietnam Fatherland Front.

Similar examples can be found among African artists and singers who sing in Chinese on Chinese social media channels, participate in TV contest shows, and make a name for themselves as representatives of African culture but also their hybrid identities and the lived – and complicated – experience of being an African in China.

The stories of Nigerian and Ghanaian communities in Tokyo also show how migration and the development of the community is driven by family stories, as well as by individual decisions made around

burial sites linked to traditions and religion. This evinces local reinvention of hybrid identities in mixed families.

Bridging public and academic worlds

As a journalist, I became fascinated with many of those stories but immediately realized that they remain very much on the margins. Knowledge produced in academia requires time and is largely unknown outside of academic institutions. Media often frames Africa-Asia collaboration as win-win projects with too little critical engagement.

But what is needed is a real sharing of knowledge and a cultural translation of a critical mass of research, data, concepts, and documentation to the wider public. Media – local, regional, international, and in all languages – needs to have access to knowledge, and those who create it must be able to tell stories that return to the people who benefit, are affected, and want to participate as individuals in the fast-developing Africa-Asia exchanges. This is why events such as the AA3 ConFest in Dakar need to not only continue, but expand, include media professionals, facilitate access to experts, and lead to serve as a true and inclusive axis of knowledge. Intellectual myopia can be corrected when people meet in real life and hear each other's stories.

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