

Review - Will Africa Feed China?

Written by Johanna Malm

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Will Africa Feed China?

Deborah Brautigam

Oxford University Press, 2015

Deborah Brautigam is *the* China-Africa scholar. Her seminal book *The Dragon's Gift* has had a deep impact on China-Africa conversations among academics, policy makers and the broader public across the world. *The Dragon's Gift* was more than just a book, it was a phenomenon. For the past ten years, Brautigam has travelled the world, sharing her insights from several decades of research on the relationship between China and Africa. Brautigam has relentlessly argued that the story is more complex than we think, underpinning her arguments with a wealth of data. She has excelled at 'myth-busting' – eloquently and firmly dismantling preconceived ideas about the nature of the Chinese presence in African countries. Her ambitious myth-busting work continues to date on her blog China in Africa: The Real Story.

Whereas *The Dragon's Gift* only contained a brief chapter on the agricultural aspect of the Chinese presence in Africa, Brautigam's recent book *Will Africa Feed China?* engages thoroughly with this issue. The book is a delight, as Robert H. Wade writes at the back of the book. It is composed of eight chapters which delve into different aspects of the agriculture related Chinese presence in Africa. The chapters are jam-packed with carefully researched and accessibly presented comparative case study data. An editorial weakness in this respect, however, is that all references are located in endnotes, which can only be found at the back of the book, and only if the reader manages to keep track of which chapter she or he is currently reading. It might seem like quibbling to point this out, but in a densely written book like this, it does matter to the reading experience.

Brautigam's book has two main tenets. The first concerns what she calls "The Dangerous Allure of Google", namely the widespread propensity to use misleading – or altogether false – media reports as truths, instead of critically assessing those media narratives. This is definitely a problem in relation to China-Africa issues, which is the example Brautigam uses in her book, but it goes beyond that. In the era of Twitter and Facebook, we can all customise what kind of information we want to access, and thus easily avoid having our own world view challenged. Brautigam's account of the many misleading stories about the Chinese presence in Africa goes to show that we all need to proceed with caution and a critical mind when forming opinions and drawing conclusions, not just in terms of China-Africa relations.

Will Africa Feed China? does contain some 'myth-busting', dispelling entrenched narratives such as 'the Chinese want to grow food in Africa and send back to China' and 'Beijing plans to send its displaced farmers to Africa'. However, the book is written in a more academic tone than *The Dragon's Gift*. Both books are based on rigorous research, but *Will Africa Feed China?* is more focused on building an empirically deep, convincing case than telling a good story and busting myths.

The second key tenet of the book is a comparative political economy argument. It is clear that for Brautigam, African countries need to welcome investment in the agriculture sector in order to benefit from technological upgrading and innovation, and thus be able to integrate better into global value chains. Brautigam draws on a large number of case studies to show how Asian agro processing companies have grown by expanding abroad. Yet, for Brautigam,

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investments alone are not a panacea for development – they also have to be steered by a proactive host state. As Brautigam points out, African states' ability to engage proactively with any societal issue, including foreign direct investment (FDI) into the agriculture sector, was radically compromised during the structural adjustment years, and the effects of this are still felt today.

It is a compelling and much needed argument that Brautigam puts forward in terms of African development and how China can contribute to it. However, it leaves me wondering what the implications are from a business and human rights perspective. Brautigam does touch upon the *cui bono* aspects to some extent in the book. She points out that Chinese investors have in some instances violated the land rights of smallholder farmers in Africa. For Chinese companies, Brautigam explains, land rights and community relations are the prerogative of states, not of foreign investors. Indeed, the Chinese understanding of sovereignty remains strongly non-interventionist, which means that neither Chinese diplomats nor Chinese investors will get involved in what they perceive to be the responsibility of the host government. Chinese companies have therefore been badly prepared for dealing with the complicated land tenure situation in many African countries, where states sometimes lease land without compensating smallholder farmers.

Although *Will Africa Feed China?* does not engage further with the issue of business and human rights in the food and agricultural industries, I do not see this as a weakness of the book *per se*. It has a different focus and one cannot ask of the book to also cover this issue. Rather, the book should serve as a starting point for empirical and conceptual conversations around the relation between sovereignty, FDI, economic development and human rights. The book opens further avenues for research on how the positive developmental effects that Chinese investments bring about can be strengthened by responsible supply chain management and corporate engagement with community relations.

About the author:

Dr. Johanna Malm has researched the Chinese presence in Africa since 2008. She has held researcher positions at the Centre for Chinese Studies at Stellenbosch University in South Africa and at the Department of Social Sciences and Business at Roskilde University in Denmark. She defended her PhD thesis on China's challenge to the IMF's power in Africa in 2016.