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SCAMMED: DISSECTING CYBER SLAVERY IN SOUTH EAST ASIA

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THE RAILPOLITIK

*Leadership and Agency in Sino-African
Infrastructure Development*



Yuan Wang

OXFORD STUDIES IN AFRICAN POLITICS & INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

The Railpolitik: A Conversation with Yuan Wang

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While China's engagement in Africa's infrastructure sector has generated a burgeoning scholarship, fieldwork-based, full-length monographs with a comparative perspective remain few. *The Railpolitik: Leadership and Agency in Sino-African Infrastructure Development* (Oxford University Press, 2023) falls into this rare category. This book takes a deep dive into the political context of the three African countries where Chinese funding and contractors have been involved in building high-profile railway projects promising to transform the local landscape: Kenya, Ethiopia, and Angola. In analysing variations in the timeliness of the projects' completion and their safe operation, Yuan Wang identifies as a key factor the instrumentalisation of the infrastructure by local leaders for the sake of their political survival. As such, this book is situated within the now well-established scholarship of 'African agency'—a body of literature seeking to uncover African actors' ability to shape their interactions with external actors despite structural asymmetry. As a political scientist, Wang spent long periods in each of the three countries, conducting extensive interviews with African and Chinese government officials, firms, and financial institutions, as well as other stakeholders. The book thus provides illuminating and thought-provoking microlevel empirical details that help to inform larger questions about structure and agency, dependency and development, as well as sources of state capacity.

Hong Zhang: You developed the argument of 'political championship' in the book to capture the 'personalistic, idiosyncratic, and unpredictable aspect of state effectiveness' (p. 2). Your case studies convincingly show that the level of commitment and political capital leaders invest in the projects is crucial for their completion and smooth operation. If we think about the policy implications of your research in terms of how to enhance state effectiveness, what are your thoughts about how such political championship can be generated or encouraged? Your cases seem to suggest different sources of political championship: electoral pressure in Kenya, developmentalism-based legitimacy in Ethiopia, and patron-clientelism in Angola. In other words, such political championship is motivated by leaders' securing their own political future and it thus does not necessarily produce inclusive development results. How, then, should we think about the normative implications of enhancing state effectiveness by boosting political championship?

Yuan Wang: This political championship theory was derived inductively from what I saw in the field—in fact, the term ‘political championship’ came from an informant in Kenya describing former president Uhuru Kenyatta’s salient role in railway delivery. What I did in this book was to truthfully document what I saw in the field, seek dialogue with existing literature, and then come up with my argument. The normative aspect did not come to me until I submitted the manuscript for review and one reviewer insisted on adding a reflection on the normative risk of driving the African agency argument too far. Later, during book talks, I was frequently asked to discuss the normative implications of my theory.

Based on these comments and discussions, I would suggest two normative implications of arguing for African political championship. The first is that the African agency argument can go too far, as if to suggest that whatever went wrong with a certain project was the Africans’ responsibility, not China’s. The second is exactly what you mentioned: the risk of making an argument in favour of personalistic leadership.

Let me elaborate here on two potential risks of drawing the African agency argument too far: the risk of ignoring structural constraints and the risk of covert apologism for foreign actors. At the foundation of the political championship theory is a belief in African agency, with the caveat that this agency is real but limited. The book’s approach of comparing African agency in different countries makes it possible to investigate the specific structural and institutional conditions that give rise to such agency. The assumption here is that agency and structure are co-constitutive and that structure holds primacy over agency. The African agency argument, as originally developed by Clapham (1996) and Bayart and Ellis (2000), recognises the structural dependency of the continent on international systems and global powers. In the context of Sino-African relations, the proposition of African agency is an argument against structural pessimism. By adopting this approach, scholarly perception of Africa is liberated from ideas of victimisation, poverty, and violence. It is also an argument that emphasises interaction between African actors and China rather than one-way domination by the latter.

But drawing the African agency argument too far risks denying the fact that structure and agency are co-constitutive. This is captured by Lonsdale’s (2000) ‘agency in tight corners’ argument, by which he means that even in the tight structural corners of international relations, African individual and collective agency can still bear causal fruit. Another helpful way of framing agency within structural constraints is distinguishing between agency and power. Carmody and Kragelund (2016) argue that ‘African agency’ is not opposed to ‘Chinese power’ and that African states have been able to exercise agency at the margins to capture a greater share of national resource rents for themselves or their treasuries.

African agency or the political championship theory should not be used as a justification for negative behaviours of international actors. Various of Chinese (and other multinational) companies’ behaviours in different African countries are attributable

to the agency of actors from the host country, but other factors are also relevant. Requirements from home countries, financial institutions, the level of internationalisation and localisation of the companies, and so on can be defining factors for behaviours such as corruption, local spillover effects, stakeholder engagement, and environmental footprints. Indeed, an emerging area of research has been the comparison of the behaviours of companies from China and from Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries, as well as projects financed by Chinese policy banks and traditional creditors.

On the second risk—that the political championship theory provides justification for dictatorship—I would say the study itself calls for an understanding of leadership, which is intuitively acknowledged but analytically overlooked in the study of state and development. The theory is also not a denial of institutional factors. As you rightly mentioned, political championship can be generated from a variety of institutional settings, all tracing back to the leaders' need to ensure their own political survival. Elections are the main source of legitimacy in Kenya, and economic growth and industrialisation provide the legitimacy for the developmental state of Ethiopia (before 2018), while oil revenue, postwar reconstruction, and patron–client networks in Angola sustained former president José Eduardo dos Santos's rule and championship of the country's social housing project. The relatively successful railway among the three was in democratic Kenya, where electoral competition led the former president to use the Chinese-sponsored railway as campaign capital. But you are correct in warning that the study of personalism should be accompanied by an understanding of institutional conditions and structural constraints.

HZ: This book also engages with the enduring, important question of whether China's economic engagements in Africa can be considered 'neocolonialism'. In this regard, you contribute to the 'extraversion' theory, which posits that African elites have a role to play in the construction of the dependent relationships between their nations and external powers and, in so doing, they feed their patronage-based system and obtain power. At the microlevel, your case studies provide plenty of examples of how the Chinese actors—including contractors, banks, and embassies—are often the ones being forced to take actions that would result in their losses as they are 'hijacked' by politics. Nevertheless, the larger picture seems to remain that Africa is growing more dependent on China. Indeed, even the extraversion theory recognises dependence. And the more losses the Chinese actors are taking now, the more likely—it is suspected—it is that they have a grand scheme for recovering those losses in the future. How, then, can we be optimistic about Africa's ability to achieve truly autonomous development, even if we recognise their agency? Where can we locate such agency, if not in the political leadership?

YW: As you say, African extraversion, or the African agency argument in general, does not deny the structural dependency and power imbalance between African states and China (as well as other external powers). So, here the question is: Is it possible to achieve development under structural asymmetry? Or can African states only achieve development when they are ‘truly autonomous’? Ian Taylor and Tim Zajontz (2020) and other neo-dependency proponents insist on ‘African resources in the hands of Africans’ and that development can only be achieved that way; this is probably along the same lines as what you propose for ‘truly autonomous development’. But is it possible in today’s highly interconnected world?

Alternatively, African states could utilise their dependent position in the global capitalist system and still achieve development. There are cases in East Asia with which we are all familiar, including the developmental states of Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and China itself. In the 1980s and 1990s, the economic miracles of these Asian Tigers were achieved under the economic and even political dominance of North American and European powers. Still, by adopting certain industrial policies and taking advantage of foreign direct investment and technology transfers from Western multinational corporations, they achieved economic miracles. Examples in Africa exist as well. You and I have studied Ethiopia’s efforts (Wang and Zhang 2024) to pursue industrialisation through learning from their Asian forerunners. This could also have been a promising case had it not deteriorated into civil war.

In terms of the locale of agency, I would still say political leaders play the most important role—not necessarily the ones at the top, but having a single politician (whether a minister, economic advisor, or prime minister) or a small coalition of them who are both strongly committed to certain policy goals (such as railway development, park-based industrialisation, etcetera) and highly capable is key. Our study of Ethiopian industrial policy proves exactly this point (Wang and Zhang 2024). In *The Railpolitik*, I also briefly discuss the Hawassa Industrial Park in Ethiopia as a positive case, highlighting how the political champion—in this case, Arkebe Oqubay, former adviser to the prime minister—was instrumental in achieving this development.

Still, one man—and, unfortunately, these politicians are almost always men in the China–Africa context—cannot achieve development alone. In *The Railpolitik*, I use process tracing to prove that political leadership, not bureaucratic agency or China, is causal to effective railway development. Yet, a committed and capable leader must be complemented by a strong bureaucracy and, in many cases, external support to achieve development, whether autonomous or dependent.

HZ: **Though not your main argument, your research echoes the arguments of other scholars that the fragmentation in the Chinese governance structure of state-owned enterprises and overseas investments means that China is not in a position to impose its will on other countries (Jones and Zeng 2019; Jones and Zou 2017; Ye 2019; Brautigam 2022). A particularly fascinating example you give in the book**

is how the Chinese Embassy and economic councillor's office in Djibouti held a dissenting view about the rationality of the Addis Ababa–Djibouti Railway, which put them at odds with their counterparts in Ethiopia and the Chinese contractors. Eventually they gave in because of the mounting pressure from the Chinese and Djiboutian governments, as well as from Chinese companies and banks involved in the project (p. 122). It is interesting that, in this case, the Chinese diplomats in Djibouti were the lone voices calling for a long-term perspective on economic viability and sustainability, while the other actors—both Chinese and Djiboutian—coalesced around the shorter-term interests associated with the construction of the railway. This example challenges researchers to rethink our assumptions about who stands for what in our examination of the political economy of such projects. Would you like to elaborate on this point about how we should understand the relationship between different Chinese actors: the central government in Beijing, the embassies, the firms, and the financial institutions?

YW: The fragmented nature of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and China in general is far from a new argument, as you mentioned. Even within China's diplomatic circles, there are disagreements between the embassies, which report to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the economic counsellor's offices, which report to the Ministry of Commerce but function under the ambassador's leadership in any given country. The Djibouti case shows that, for a cross-border BRI project, the economic counsellor's office in Ethiopia might have disagreed with their counterpart in Djibouti. There were disagreements even within the economic counsellor's office in Djibouti. My fieldwork allowed me to document these disagreements, but theoretically, I directly applied the 'fragmented authoritarianism' framework without further developing it into, as you mentioned, a framework to understand the relationship between different global Chinese actors. This is an exciting area for future research.

HZ: Another debate with which your research engages is whether there is any correlation between regime type and the ability of the state to promote development. Among your three cases, the strongest 'political championship' was found not in Ethiopia, which adopted a 'developmental state' ideology under a largely authoritarian regime, but in former Kenyan president Kenyatta, who pressed for the accelerated completion of the Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) Phase 1 to serve his electoral campaign in 2017. You thus challenge 'the conventional belief that electoral competition produces short-term survival incentives for elites, which is supposedly not as effective for development as centralized, long-term rent management' (p. 10). This speaks to the debate in the developmental state literature about whether long-term development strategies are more likely to be generated by authoritarian (but developmentally minded) regimes (Cheng 1990; Haggard 2018: 35–37). However, as we see in all your cases—Kenya, Ethiopia, and Angola—such political championship

does not endure; it can diminish when electoral priorities shift or leaders die. What are your thoughts on how to forge more durable political commitment to development?

YW: This is a very interesting and challenging question. The core of political championship is built on leaders' individual agency, which is characterised by personalism, idiosyncrasy, and volatility—in other words, non-endurance. Structural and institutional factors endure, while individual factors vacillate. There is, however, an overemphasis on structural and institutional factors in the study of politics, policy, and development. This risks leaving some phenomena unexplained, particularly in today's world, where we have seen the rise of individual leaders who show personalistic, sometimes unpredictable, behaviours that defy structural and institutional constraints. The book's emphasis on leaders' agency is a truthful documentation and theorisation of what I saw on the ground. But from where does political championship come? I argue that historical and institutional factors can be sources of developmental leadership. This deviates from traditional leadership analysis, which focuses on personal history, psychology, and charisma. There are persuasive works on political settlement (for instance, see Khan 2010) and selectorate theory (Buono de Mesquita et al. 2005) that focus on winning coalitions and elite survival. Ultimately, what matter are the political survival incentives shaped by institutions.

HZ: Your book has such rich empirical details because of the months of fieldwork you did in each of the three African countries, as well as in China. You spoke to more than 250 interviewees, including some individuals who were very difficult to access. I particularly appreciate reading your reflections on your fieldwork experience in the Appendix, where you very candidly discuss how your nationality, gender, hometown, education, professional background, funding source, and other aspects of your identity affected your interactions with both Chinese and African interlocutors. You also shared how you handled the mistrust coming from your interviewees—a passage that should be recommended to any student embarking on fieldwork, as these situations can be challenging mentally as well as physically.

One thing you mentioned that struck me was 'playing the innocent card'—something perhaps adopted intentionally or unintentionally by many young female researchers as it is a 'natural' strategy given the gender dynamics in the field. Alas, that strategy could become less useful as we become more 'senior'! Do you think building trust was any easier as you went back to the field recently as a more seasoned field researcher? What are some of the new strategies you are using? A larger question is whether you think field researchers can help change the culture of non-transparency typically associated with Chinese overseas engagements, if we keep knocking on the doors of Chinese actors overseas?

YW: Trust has been a constant challenge for my fieldwork. As my academic identity changed from PhD student to postdoc researcher and then to faculty member, from Western-based institutions to a China-based joint-venture university, the dynamics with my interlocutors changed as well. Places like Oxford and Harvard have some magical effect on Chinese people: their curiosity about these big names and their dedication to children's education might have helped me get interviews. But I have been accused of being a spy (although those accusing me were not sure for whom I worked, whether it was the UK, US, or Chinese governments), and some Chinese informants asked me to show them my Chinese passport. Gaining trust from new informants these days is not any easier.

Friendships cultivated in the field over years are helpful, as this can significantly shorten the entry time. Now when I visit a field country, which I usually do at least once a year, the first week is dedicated to catching up with old friends, which has been very helpful for trust-building purposes. I also find that some fruitful discussions happen during informal chats over lunch, dinner, and tea, rather than me holding a threatening laptop or notebook, jotting down everything they say.

Can we improve the transparency of Chinese projects overseas? Very important improvements have been made by Deborah Brautigam's and Kevin Gallaher's teams at Johns Hopkins University and Boston University, as well as William & Mary's Global Research Institute's AidData, which have strived to demystify Chinese global loans and projects through data collection and case studies. But altering global Chinese actors' culture of non-transparency is a task at a different level—inquisitive (and potentially careless) fieldwork researchers could even unintentionally exacerbate the situation, causing previously opened doors to close.

We could probably start by improving the transparency of our fieldwork. Qualitative fieldwork itself is, to many, a black box full of treasures and mines. Some of these challenges are discussed in class, among peers, at conferences, and passed on from advisers. But, for the most part, we are met by one surprise after another once we are in the field. Thorough documentation of this process is not a common practice for political scientists or Global China scholars in general. The extended appendices of *The Railpolitik* are my humble effort to enhance the transparency of fieldwork and reflections on positionality in the analysis of Global China. ●