

**‘With those views, you should work for the Communist Party of China’: challenging Western knowledge production on China-Africa relations**

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**Abstract**

China's relations with the African continent continues to be misrepresented within the Western (North American and European) academe. This is due, in part, to the methodological and epistemological assumptions underpinning many research agendas. These agendas are founded upon a range of histories, theories and frameworks that have been produced in the West, by the West, and for a particular end – within a particular location, or, event.

This paper brings forward some original empirical data - from five months field research in South Africa which questioned power and agency (participation and self-determination) in response to Chinese Development assistance - to support, and bring into conversation, emerging literatures which focus upon the 'uneven production of knowledge' on and about China. It works with critiques of historicism and emerging concepts such as Sinological-orientalism and Sinologism, to explain how the continued measuring and representation of China through Western concepts,

understandings and logics, come to reduce, in an Orientalist manner, accurate relations between China and Africa.

Conclusions join calls for more balanced and disinterested scholarship on the China-Africa relationship and argue that this can only be achieved through greater geographical and temporal specificity within writing. Within current work on China-Africa relations there is a lack of empirical qualitative data being collected, or, arguments are being extrapolated from limited cases. This paper represents a critical case that introduces new voices and alternative narratives from (South) African's themselves.

### Introduction

*To all Cape Town Chinese, I just want to say that we celebrate you. We celebrate your energy and your contribution to our economy. Now, as a well-established community, we say this to you...long may you be here (Cape Town Government Representative, 11 February 2015).*

These are the words spoken by a representative of the City of Cape Town's local government at a reception hosted by the Consulate General of the People's Republic of China (PRC). It was an event, held in Cape Town, to mark the Chinese New year. The comments were documented during an early period of fieldwork that looked to investigate issues of power and agency – questions of participation and self-determination - in response to China's growing presence as a D/development partner on the African continent. The research took its start upon the news that the United Kingdom (UK) was looking to end its aid to South Africa (BBC, 2013; DFID, 2013). It was a personal view within the study, possibly resulting from an inherent bias as a white British male scholar within the Western academe, that South Africa was, in respect of this, losing what could be perceived as a 'responsible' partner, only to be replaced by an exploitative and self-interested PRC. Such a view acknowledged arguments that China saw the 'Development' arena as yet another geopolitical axis in which to gain power over, and access to, valuable African resources. This argument structured itself around the wealth of criticisms on Empire, Development and Colonialism (Duffield and Hewitt, 2009) and broader criticisms focusing on the burgeoning China-Africa relationship that came to represent a 'third wave' of colonisation

and land alienation (Cheru and Modi, 2013; Moyo, 2013; Sidaway, 2002; Taylor, 2014).

Yet, as further sentiments similar to those in the opening lines (discussed in detail later) came to the forefront of the investigation, it became clear that the research agenda – particularly its methodological and epistemological assumptions – needed redress. Whilst the ceremonial rhetoric (the smoke and mirrors) that are associated with such events, and China’s diplomacy more widely, are well-known (see Bakken, 2000; Gong, 2012; Strauss, 2009), what had not been accounted for was the widespread voices of support celebrating the China-Africa relationship and, furthermore, the expression of intent to extend such relations further. This paper represents that iterative reflection on a somewhat misinformed – yet revealing – line of questioning. Put simply, in the context of the original study, through what logic do so many Western scholars come to represent China *as* colonial rather than asking ‘is it’? What is important here is not the outcomes of that particular study (that is for a later paper), but the assumptions that came to guide it.

Whilst a somewhat personal reflection of time spent in South Africa - during which qualitative data (semi-structured interviews, field observations, and documentary analysis) was collected at three Chinese-led development projects (an automotive factory within an Industrial Development Zone [IDZ], a new urban infrastructure project, and a mine complex) - the framing of what follows looks to bring into conversation some of the emerging literatures that attempt to explain why there continues to be this somewhat ‘uneven production of knowledge’ (a bias towards the West as both the source, and holder of, superior knowledge) on the PRC and its relations to Africa. Focus will be placed on the work of Vivek Chibber (2013), Daniel Vukovich (2012), and Ming Dong Gu (2013) who bring into question the role of historicism, Sinological-Orientalism and Sinologism respectively.

The paper demonstrates that current theoretical framings – in this instance postcolonial theory - are somewhat flawed and come to misrepresent relations. Conclusions will call for a more nuanced approach to the study of China by those in the Western academe. As Daniel Vukovich argues: ‘What is at stake here is not the truth but a certain paternalist, even colonial arrogance from abroad...’ (Vukovich, 2012: 8).

Such thinking holds *Orientalist* tropes in which China is reduced to some negative 'Other':

...for various reasons, the West's perceptions, conceptions, generalisations, and evaluations tend to be detached from the real conditions of Chinese culture and society (Gu, 2013: 15).

As an illustration of this, on returning from the field, back in the UK, the sharing of the results outlined here were simply met amongst colleagues (many who have long spent their time studying notions of power and agency) with the view that any such hint of positivity towards China can only mean that your next stop is membership of the Communist Party of China. Positivity towards China was an error, or a joke. It is these views which are challenged here-on-in.

### **China as colonial**

China's engagement with the African continent has come to represent the biggest change in African international relations since the ending of the Cold War (Taylor, 2014). In the West, China's engagement with Africa is seen to be just as concerning as issues of poverty and terrorism. There is a heightened, almost alarmist, interest in its engagements as it comes to challenge the position of the so-called 'unchallengeable' states within Europe and America. These engagements with Africa have grown in-sync with its wider economic might (Escobar, 1995) and the PRC is now identified as Africa's largest bilateral trading partner (Taylor, 2014). As Giovanni Arrighi notes:

...when the history of the *second* half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century will be written in such a longer perspective, the changes are that no single theme will prove to be of greater significance than the economic renaissance of East Asia. [...] The revolt against the West created the political conditions for the social and economic empowerment of the people of the non-Western world (2008: 1).

China's role as a development partner with Africa fits within the broader trajectory of actors from the global 'South' - should the geographic imaginary of China in the so-called 'South' be accepted - taking ownership of the development agenda through

‘South-South’ cooperation. Those looking to ‘develop’ do so knowing that there is no longer a single pathway or one that is dictated by the presumptive normative path of the West (DeHart, 2012; Mawdsley, 2012; Muchapondwa et al., 2016; Raghuram et al., 2014; Richey and Ponte, 2014). The BRICS grouping of nations (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) who are leading this divergent approach - providing finance and trade agreements for schools, hospitals, technology, industry, transport, and universities - are acknowledged by some as being seen as the ‘new Saviours’ of the global South (see Cheru and Modi, 2013; Muchapondwa et al., 2016; Taylor, 2014). The BRICS predominantly work unilaterally and are seen to hold differing objectives, ideologies, and practices ‘... distinct from and superior to “Western” models of development’ (Berger, 1995: 717). These differing practices include the promotion of ‘trade’ rather than ‘aid’ with the view that cooperation should be ‘win-win’ with benefits for *both* donor and recipient.

China, specifically, has transformed the development landscape from one based on *public* funds to the increasing use of *private* capital – a transition from governments giving grants or material resources to achieving overseas development objectives through trade and investment. In the context of China, which uses State-owned Enterprises (SOEs) or state-owned policy banks (thus retaining its *public* lineages) this becomes translated within this context as the use of market mechanisms, beyond its domestic borders, for the transfer of finance, the facilitation of capital growth, and the exchange of commodities. The PRC’s loosening grip on private capital, as SOEs become increasingly managed like private enterprises, allows this to be the case even in a state still officially governed by a Communist Party. This sentiment is exemplified by the wealth of literature within journals of accounting and finance showing how Chinese businesses and banks adopt ‘Western’ mechanisms and standards (see Cao et al., 1999; Nolan and Wang, 1999; Wu et al., 2007).

With the use of language such as ‘saviours’ – these actors seen as playing ‘...a progressive role in reducing the gap between the core and the developing

world' (Taylor, 2016: 170) – it is no surprise that there is concern over the true implications of these new relations. Such a language comes to represent power and hierarchy and demonstrates very little change when it comes to a reorientation of power for those who have, for many years, been subject to development assistance from 'above' and 'outside.' Developing further the contentious nature of such directions, the type of development promoted overseas by China is based on *markets* and *competition* and has been highly criticised. Such an approach leaves business executives responsible for development objectives and, as some have argued, makes them no more responsible for progress '...than a hammer is responsible for the carpenter's thumb' (Blowfield and Dolan, 2014: 24). Such practices have even led some to suggest that disasters can be engineered or exacerbated for the purpose of profiteering. As an example, pharmaceutical companies withholding HIV drugs or vaccinations to ensure the product enters the market at the peak of demand and the highest price (Hühne et al., 2014; Mohan, 2013; Mohan and Lampert, 2012; Weizman, 2011). These authors go on to suggest that Development, *through* the market, damages local business environments (driving out local competition), reduces employment opportunities (through the importing of labour) and dissolves cultural heterogeneity through the transplanting of foreign processes and practices (Hirono and Suzuki, 2014; Moyo, 2013; Wang and Zou, 2014). China has itself acknowledged that even with its 'socialist' principles, a certain level of inequality must be tolerated (Harvey 2005).

Many of these criticisms stem directly from the Chinese governments motivations for engaging at a developmental level in Africa. One of these is the gross need for resources to meet its own domestic energy and food security needs. China also has a growing urban class and the government proactively seeks new markets for its traders and producers. All of this is seen by critics as a resource 'grab' utilising Africa's cheap and suitably abundant land in a manner replicating the political and economic conditions of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century (Berthoud, 2010; Cheru and Modi, 2013; Escobar, 2008; Sachs, 2010; Schoneveld and German, 2014; Steger and Roy, 2010; Taylor, 2014; Wang and Zou, 2014). China, from this perspective, is considered to be re-establishing relations of centre/periphery - the essence of colonial and imperial

economics - by taking primary commodities and returning manufactured goods at considerably higher costs (Escobar, 2008; Harvey, 2005; Rodney, 2012; Sidaway, 2002; Taylor, 2014). For those looking to achieve 'better' more 'egalitarian' development (Atkins et al., 2006; McEwan, 2009; Noxolo et al., 2012) Chinese development assistance is associated with unfair land acquisitions, the forced relocation of traditional communities, and environmental damage.

Central to China's engagements, and what is seen to legitimise or make such an approach favourable, is the notion that it does so without encroaching on the sovereignty of recipient nations – against the backdrop of the West (North American and European development policies) who impose conditionalities in their trade and development interventions (see reference to Structural Adjustment policies in Briggs and Yeboah, 2001). Yet, critics argue this means holding no obligation to development outcomes and leads to the support for 'corrupt' governments and safeguards those who are responsible for massacres and regimes of violence (Halper, 2012; Hirono and Suzuki, 2014). Hillary Clinton, a United States (US) politician and 2016 Presidential candidate, quoted by DeHart (2012), offers one perspective of Chinese development assistance, she says:

Be wary of donors who are more interested in extracting your resources than in building your capacity. Some funding might help fill short-term budget gaps, but we've seen time and again that these quick fixes won't produce self-sustaining results (2012: 1260).

From this brief overview it is clearly seen that there are real concerns and assumptions, particularly amongst those based in the Western academe, indicating that the PRC is detrimental to African development. With particular reference to the study undertaken here within South Africa, postcolonial theory – the theoretical lens that was used to analyse China's development assistance – brings forward the same underlying viewpoints, for similar reasons, that China should not be welcomed. These arguments are particularly pertinent for nations that have only recently fought hard for freedom and independence. Yet, at the same time, there is a counter-narrative to what has been told here.

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## South African perspectives on the PRC

In a challenge to the literature, voices from within South Africa seemed to provide an alternative, counter-narrative, to the arguments told above. If the study was one about agency and power, then it is only the South Africans themselves who can inform us on whether they feel powerless at the hands of Chinese actors. What follows are responses from communities, business executives, unions and high-level government officials. Responses look at opinions, but also importantly, various institutional adaptations being made to further deepen and promote China-South Africa relations. The broad range of participants within the study show that, even within such a highly stratified society, a common narrative on, and about, China can be validated – from township residents to business elites.

One area of interest was the recruitment of Chinese staff by South African companies, development agencies, and government departments. This is significant because it goes against the suggested high level protest of 'foreign' workers coming to South Africa – evidenced through a spate of migrant killings and the looting of foreign-owned shops (see Porter, 2015). Although these protests have not, as yet, taken aim specifically at Chinese migrants, it comes to further demonstrate the 'exceptional' space that China occupies within the minds of South Africans – tolerance and acceptance. South African businesses and development agencies were seen to hire Chinese staff to work with and further attract Chinese investment. One of these Chinese individuals described their job:

I do daily research and make daily contact with Chinese companies back in China to see if there are opportunities for them to come over here. It is our job to attract Chinese investors to South Africa.

Beyond all criticisms, there was a determined effort to attract more Chinese businesses and industries. Making further reference to the Chinese workforce, South African employers argued that 'Chinese workers are willing to work holidays and also after work. They sacrifice their time off.' This seems to counter the literature that, far from the Chinese coming to exploit South African workers, it looks as if South African businesses and those looking to fast-track South African development are pre-

pared to do the same to Chinese workers. Commenting further on Chinese character it was seen that in investment negotiations Chinese workers and businessmen were described as ‘friendly, and humble’ which was directly contrasted to the dog-eat-dog approach by Western companies. Furthermore, Chinese production and manufacturing processes were also seemingly admired. Research participants commented on how ‘China can now offer good quality and a cheaper price. Not the old “Made in China” that was of bad quality.’ The Business Chamber added that Chinese citizens ‘drive efficiency’ and we are ‘pleased to learn from that.’

There were efforts at all scales to create the human and physical infrastructure needed for China to move more industries to the country. The development zone had a state-funded training centre that looked at providing skills training for local communities – skills training tailored to the specific requests of incoming Chinese investors. The Development zone also provided Chinese organisations with favourable taxes (as much as ten per cent cheaper), free stationary, administrative and garden services and vehicle repairs. The South African government will even build your factory: ‘We are very proud of that.’ These are all benefits that are not necessarily available to domestic companies or organisations outside of the IDZ. On a cautious note, the role of IDZ’s in national development have long been contested (Peters and Fisher, 2004; Wilder and Rubin, 1996) with histories, in various countries, of providing little return (other than much valued employment opportunities) after these many exemptions and services have been made or provided.

Efforts are also widely made to encourage people, from primary education to the executive boardroom, to learn the Chinese language. Training is also provided focusing on ‘How to do business with China’ which is offered to banks, factories, schools and both government and non-governmental organisations. All these are decisions ‘consciously done’ on the South African side to further deepen the relationship. These ideas only begin to touch on some of institutional developments taking place - others including the acknowledgement and honouring of Chinese national holidays and the sending out of Chinese greetings cards. As one worker protested: ‘I celebrate St Patrick’s Day - but we don’t get the day off.’

At a larger political level, South Africa recognises that China offers a certain stability today that others cannot (see O'Brien, 2015). The 2008 global financial crash, which China seemingly managed to weather, is regularly referred to. It is recognised that China can offer unrivalled opportunities, taking some areas from '...the declining automotive and textile industries, to now, nuclear and renewables.' The UK stopping its aid to South Africa was referred to earlier, in response, one individual laughed - 'At least the Chinese are sticking around.' China, itself a 'developing' nation, is offering something the West cannot. As one government representative argued:

The difference between many of the European and American companies that are currently here is that the market is limited. The African market is not so sophisticated so they have to export back into Europe. The Chinese are specifically looking at serving Africa. [...] What China is doing here is purely for the African market. About three months ago they started taking their products to Angola, Zimbabwe, and so on. It is not going back to China.

If we move the discussion away from the business and corporate environment, which you would expect to be supportive, and look at residents within townships or communities in traditional rural areas, it is also surprising that there is further support for the China-Africa relationship. In reference to the development zone, one individual said: 'We are in support of the development zone. We want big business for big impact. They are doing some seriously good work'. On a lighter note, a Township resident comments: 'As I told you...the Chinese do not pay with cheque [he laughs]. They carry cash. I also buy a lot of Chinese things. Appliances and stuff.' He goes on: 'We refer here to our comrades from China.' These sort of comments are reiterated by the government who say that, at the end of the day, it will be the consumer who dictates the relationship with China: 'From that point-of-view, South African's do not seem to demonstrate discontent.'

Representing support for the 'market-driven' approach to development, residents and business owners seem to believe the associated 'trickle-down' is working. One local

South African land owner, who is now building low-cost housing, states:

...our land has gained significance due to the ambitious [Chinese] development. And I mean, we are seeing land prices double, double, and double again. [...] You are getting economies of scale beyond what any government can possibly provide. When the government hands out title deeds to those in the townships, the land will be in excess of one million Rand.

Obviously the limits of such an argument should be recognised. These benefits are only favourable if you are the landowner and hold land rights – not so good if you want or need affordable housing.

With regards to Development literature which takes issue at foreign states or international organisations deploying ‘experiments’ on the global ‘South’, such as the International Monetary Fund’s (IMF) shock treatment and structural adjustment policies, there was a general view on the ground that China and its potential ‘experiment’ in Africa is to be accepted:

...they are definitely testing the water first. And that would be a good thing, because, for us at least, we get an understanding of their concerns, ideas, and what they would like to achieve. And more importantly, it helps us to make sure we do not lose our identity.

There was also evidence that China had been learning from its engagements with South Africa which has only been nurtured and enforced through the business/corporate environment. The urban infrastructure project provided a great example of the cooperation and knowledge exchange taking place:

...having a [Chinese] developer that is very familiar with the Chinese market, seizing a really great opportunity in South Africa, but not being completely comfortable with that market. So the [Chinese company] has been really smart in getting the local developer to work with them. Now they work as a single company with the local developer providing 17 years of onsite experience.

The research also asked where fault lies when issues in the relationship do arise. Asked if the real issue was with the South African government, one Senior Official from South Africa's Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) responded: 'Exactly! That is how we look at it. It is whether our system has stood up to the extent that it should, or not. If there are issues with China, it is our systems that have failed.' Further urging not to be so concerned with the relationship, they went on: 'South Africa, because of its unique history and the hard fight for freedom and democracy, we will be much more protective over our democracy and basic freedoms than many other countries would be.' This would be similar for other African nations too. These views were echoed in the politically vibrant Townships: 'Basically what is happening is in our communities, we have a problem with our own leadership.' One resident of Alexander acknowledged that blame is bluntly with former President Mbeki and current leader Zuma - 'not the Chinese.'

This section ends here with one comment that rightly put the concerns of the original study into perspective:

You know, we are not that naïve here in the colonies! We are well versed in dealing with the pretty ugly sides of the world. In other words, we can handle China ourselves.

What has been evidenced here are explicit responses – actions and statements – that have been taken 'as said.' From this, it needs to be recognised, in taking analysis forward, that none of these statements would be free from other forces of power and there would be a variety of reasons why individuals may take such a stance. Many arguments are made under other discursive conditions, possibly within a capitalist drive for growth (the need to 'keep-up'), the greed of South Africa's chief executives, a government needing to display open and favourable diplomacy, or a party political system in which votes and short term gains (at the expense of the long term) take priority. But, the views expressed cannot simply, as a result, be cast-out or refused. These are often the views and statements that are taken to international forums (for example, the BRICS summits) and it is, unfortunately, performances and verbal statements that enact, and are drivers of, change. It goes without saying, these should be read openly, as any interpretation of qualitative data should be.

Moving forward, what follows is an introduction to some emerging work that attempts to explain the disjuncture between the theoretical work and data shown here.

### **An explanation: historicism, Sinological-orientalism and Sinologism**

On return from fieldwork, time was spent thinking about how arguments or thought processes had become challenged by the empirical evidence. Specifically, why these voices identified here, and alternatives, are rarely heard in the literature on China-Africa relations. The first explanatory note focuses upon the role of grand theories, or historicism, which have come to be used to approach understandings of global relations. Referring here to the field of postcolonial studies, only through familiarity with it, and by no means the only culprit, the issue was seen that:

For generations now, philosophers and thinkers who shape the nature of social science have produced grand theories that embrace the entirety of humanity. As we well know, these statements have been produced in relative, and sometimes absolute, ignorance of the majority of humankind – that is, those living in non-Western cultures (Chakrabarty, 2008: 29).

Vivek Chibber's (2013) work, found within his book on *Postcolonial Theory the Specter of Capital* provides the best analysis of when theory created or written in one context, for example Western Marxism, cannot simply be used to explain or criticise phenomena in another. His analysis considers the work of the Subaltern Studies group who apply Western capitalist logic to locations such as India. Chibber cites work of Chakrabarty (2008) who acknowledges in *Provincializing Europe*:

No country is a model to another country [...] because no human society is a *tabula rasa*. The universal concepts of political modernity encounter pre-existing concepts, categories, institutions and practices through which they get translated and configured differently (2008: xii).

It was noted that whilst capital (at the heart of the development assistance discussed here) can have a global reach, it can never be universal. In the context of this study

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and those that question terms such as modernity, globalisation, colonial- and imperialism, it cannot be assumed that they operate the same in all places. These are ideas and concepts generated or nurtured primarily in the Western academe based on historical events or geographical phenomena. Because of that, the 'evidence' or 'events' represent something very specific. Citing Lawrence Grossberg, Chakrabarty writes about re-situating the local into global theory because '...every event is potentially evidence, potentially determining, and at the same time, changing too quickly to allow the comfortable leisure of academic criticism' (2008: 7). Our use of historically or geographically specific events become too 'fuzzy' as a tool of accuracy. The work on the China-South Africa relationship, evidenced within this paper, centred its analysis on measuring against Western theory. This has proven to be problematic. Using criticisms found within Ian Taylor's (2014) economic analysis on *Diversifying Dependency*, for example, becomes inadequate for the study of cultural change, or to hold up as the measure of Chinese engagements. Taylor's assessment of relations through Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and various other 'econometrics' to show how Africa continues to become positioned in a subordinate light as a primary commodity producer misrepresents growth or the desires, freedoms and increased agency of recipients. Chibber rightly illustrates the issue: 'When abstract theories misdescribe local practice in this way, it is not that the specificity of the local is obscured. The casual dynamics are also misrepresented...' (Chibber, 2013: 213).

The evidence here only proves further that China comes to challenge many theoretical understandings of the contemporary world (Vukovich, 2012, 2013; see also Raghuram et al., 2014). It also comes to challenge the view that China is looking to replicate the West and integrate into global systems. China is seen, by some, to be doing things differently and on its own merits: '...China has its own modernity, which is not only different from the West but is actually its opposite' (Callahan, 2012: 34). China will follow its own path. Current ways of knowing cannot simply be transplanted onto new relations. This has been happening partly due to the rapid growth of interest in China-Africa studies. Theoretical work that took root in International Relations and Political Science have diversified into economic, environmental, and cultural studies. In the process of doing so, 'difference' has rarely been

acknowledge - with regards to the need to approach analysis of China within a different framing - and assumptions in one field are too commonly used to justify assumptions in another. Whilst many recognise China as being ‘not like us’, models rarely change.

Building on from the notion of grand theory misrepresenting local causality the work of Daniel Vukovich (2012) argues that this misrepresentation of China and its process and practices comes to represent a new strain of *Orientalism* – extending the work of Edward Said (2003). Using incorrect frames of analysis produces a system of knowledge production that holds the ability to curate China in the vision of the West. Vukovich calls this *Sinological-orientalism*. It differs slightly in that whilst *Orientalism* was a product of literary studies, *Sinological-orientalism* is a product of social-scientific and Cold War writing. He explains: ‘Representations of the PRC seemed a clear instance of *positional superiority* over and against some entity called China’ (Vukovich, 2012: xii), he continues, ‘[China] was not colonised. The latter freedom makes it fair game: one can speak guiltlessly...’ (2012: xiii). Too often when theorising on China we identify it simply as ‘different’ and thus ‘opposite.’ This bounds our openness to new ideas and pre-determines our conclusions. Examples used by Vukovich include the West’s interpretation of the Tiananmen Square protests, the demonisation of Mao and the deaths resulting from the Great Leap Forward.

What *Orientalism* and *Sinological-orientalism* have in common is that they are both ‘anti-empirical’ and ‘self-reinforcing’:

...Orientalism was and is about knowledge production and its distribution, the accumulation of information about an area/Other for the purpose of control, management, administration, and profit [...]. It is a material phenomenon, the production of a multifarious discourse that becomes institutionalised and that is articulated to global political-economy and imperialism even as it takes the form of intellectual and scholarly knowledge (Vukovich, 2012: 142).

A common thread through these discussions so far is the foundations used to struc-

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ture arguments and assumptions on the PRC.

Ending here, with the work of Ming Dong Gu's (2013) notion of *Sinologism*, his ideas build on what has already been said but brings forward the realisation that once China has been misrepresented through processes of *Sinological-orientalism*, these ideas are then re-inscribed beyond their initial formation (*Orientalism* and *Sinological-orientalism* were always performed to achieve an end and thus held what could be called an 'agenda-bias'). Knowledge produced through these processes are now used as the source material for the study of China, not only in the West, but by Chinese scholars themselves. To put it another way, *Sinologism* is the epistemological and methodological assumptions that we make on, and about, China due to knowledge systems founded upon Western theory and politicised agendas. Whilst *Orientalism* and *Sinological-orientalism* are seen to have been 'employed' for political gain, and the tool of governments and traders, *Sinologism* is an unconscious process used by academics and wider society. China, and its scholars, now represents itself as the West does. To clarify, Gu writes:

I have been keenly aware of a deep-seated intellectual mentality and scholarly habit in China-West studies; the conscious and unconscious acceptance of Western teleological models and conceptual frameworks for Chinese materials irrespective of their appropriateness and the historical and cultural conditions in which the materials would generate (Gu, 2013: 3).

The result being:

...the Chinese intellectual [...] viewing China in terms of the Western perception, conception, evaluation, and the accompanying way of determining and measuring the value and achievements of their own culture in terms of Western values, endorsements or disapproval (Gu, 2013: 106).

It is noted that, at once, we talk of China as achieving miracle growth and development whilst also being a place of human rights violations and oppression – not inac-

curate or unique dichotomies (Britain too developing on a similar history – for example, growth founded on slavery) – but Western scholars are seen to hold the privilege of selection. Gu has argued that Western scholars begin their inquiries with [these] pre-conceived ideas. Their studies are simply designed to ‘confirm’ or ‘disconfirm’ their preconceptions. This possibly at the centre of the problematics of the study focused upon in this paper. Gu goes on: ‘In some cases, if the Chinese conditions do not support their notions, they will remould the Chinese materials so as to fit them into the Procrustean bed of Western conceptions and imaginations’ (Gu, 2013: 17).

In short what the emerging literature in this analysis is coherent in saying, and what should be taken forward, is that scholars of Africa-China relations must stop alienating knowledge by continually taking the stance that ‘Western standard[s] must [be] upheld as the yardstick by which Chinese materials are to be evaluated’ (Gu, 2013: 7). The critical analytical tools of Western origin must be challenged.

### **Conclusions**

Through reflecting on a piece of fieldwork that looked at China and South Africa as development partners this paper has done two things. Firstly, it has come to challenge the epistemological and methodological assumptions made regularly in the Western academe, and beyond, regarding the growing dominance of the PRC. The discussions here have demonstrated that the founding assumptions within the study, in this instance those born within postcolonial studies, led an approach to the China-Africa relationship that took an inherent negative framing. Secondly, it has contributed to bringing forward new empirical data and voices that represent a less-often reported corrective on the China-Africa relationship. The result is an original contribution highlighting a range of voices and alternative arguments from South Africans themselves. African voices have been lacking in discussions to-date. Providing alternative perspectives had delivered a different alternative reading. This data has supported arguments made within emerging literature on historicism, Sinological-Orientalism and Sinologism.

It has been demonstrated that the PRC continues to be misrepresented within the

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Western academe (and beyond) due in part to the continued reliance upon, and misuse of, theoretical understandings that were developed and transposed in reference to Western historical events and experiences. Whilst it cannot be argued that the negative perceptions of China's past are inaccurate - it can be certain that there have been instances of exploitation and political misjudgement on behalf of the Chinese government - it has to be accepted that history as a point of reference can only be productive to a point. National policies change and countries develop. Referring back to one Union representative, he acknowledged: 'They are getting better, they are beginning to understand'. Today's conditions and relations may have vastly improved.

It is clear China has come to challenge our understanding of the contemporary world and this work comes in agreement with calls for a depoliticised scholarship on China. We need to develop existing theory and at the same time grasp the creativity and confidence needed to break from models of the past. While European thought is both valuable and indispensable it is at the same time 'inadequate in helping us think through the experience of political modernity in non-Western nations' (Chakrabarty, 2008: 16). There is a lack of empirical data collection being undertaken to support arguments, or, arguments are being extrapolated from limited cases. There is a need for geographical and temporal specificity within writing which will at the same time open up space for alternative (African) voices. This is something too often lost in the cross-fire as Western scholars dedicate their resources to 'knowing' China, and China only. Leaving the last word to Gu (2013), failing to take steps to address the issues flagged here will simply lead to:

...wars of discourse, culture wars, or even worse, ideological wars, which will compromise the dissemination of knowledge, promote cultural intolerance and bigotry, and hinder inter-cultural understanding (2013: 13).

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