

Deborah Brautigam's *Will Africa Feed China?*: A critical media-centric review

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Abstract

One of the recent noteworthy books in the Africa-China field is Professor Deborah Brautigam's *Will Africa Feed China?* The central argument of the paper is that the book is as much a media critique as it is a critique on Chinese investments in African agriculture. Using the book as a springboard, the author begins by commenting on Africa-China/China-Africa scholarship and Brautigam's place in it. The paper then delineates and analyses the media dimensions of the book. After unpacking the media aspects, the paper concludes with a discussion on further research considerations.

Introduction

For students of Africa-China media and communications, Deborah Brautigam's "*Will Africa Feed China*" is more than just a book about real and imagined Chinese agricultural interests in Africa. It is a treatise on journalistic practice and the role of the media in a geopolitical relationship that attracts headlines. It is, therefore, worthwhile going beyond convention to analyse this publication as part book review and part journal paper.

The work of journalists constitutes a major part in the book. This places the book within the broader Africa-China media and communications scholarship with a focus

on journalistic fact-checking. Africa-China media and communications scholars have pointed out that journalists seem to be aware of their inability to continuously cover the complexities of the China story as they focus on macro political and economic events (Wasserman, 2016: 14, 16). Focus on the "big story" with little attention to tell-tale details is a possible source of erroneous facts in journalistic reporting. Generally, African journalists show disinterest in the China story with the exception being events that have bread and butter benefits for Africans in particular countries and locales (Wekesa, 2013a: 70; Wasserman, 2016: 12). Journalistic focus on economic benefits is a double-edged sword as it may lead to reporting overblown figures. The matter is complicated by the scarcity of data on Chinese financing of development finance. As a result, journalists and other commentators end up making sweeping generalisations. Indeed, tracking Chinese financial flows to Africa can be a daunting task for ill-trained journalists and poorly-resourced media organisations hard-put securing budgets for extended investigative reporting (Strange et al., 2013: 19). Chinese journalism is inclined towards positive reporting (Gagliardone, 2013: 34) and this may spur the reporting of inflated figures. On the other hand, there is "fear" among Western journalists that China is taking over a continent formerly considered a Western sphere of influence. Western media are, therefore, likely to use financial figures to advance this narrative.

It is in this Africa-China media and communications field that Brautigam's book makes a contribution. One of the concerns that this paper will look at is whether Brautigam's book is located in the "China-Africa" or "Africa China" dimension. References to the field as "China-Africa" or "Africa-China" is often done fairly casually when a closer spotlight on these lexical categories might reveal opposing semantic deductions that speak to varying perspectives, worldviews, viewpoints, starting points and motivations. Distinction between "Africa-China" and "China-Africa" can be a convoluted task requiring a separate treatment that is beyond the scope of this article. In brief, Bodomo problematised Africa-China/China-Africa:

... why at (sic) all do African scholars ... write: "China – Africa" and not "Africa – China"? The Chinese almost always write China before

Africa, they don't write Africa ahead of China and I understand them. Almost all prominent Western scholars, mostly sinologists who think China is more prominent than Africa, also write China before Africa. But to have African scholars, who should be putting Africa first in all worldviews, also doing the same? I am disturbed about this ... (Musakwa, 2013).

Bodomo's viewpoint is that the geographical and perhaps racial and cultural milieu of a scholar matters. This can evidently be a hot topic, for instance, pitting Afrocentricity versus universalism. For the current paper, it is sufficient to point out that *Will Africa Feed China* is more a China-Africa publication than an Africa-China one as demonstrated below. Indeed, one can also say that Brautigam's earlier publication: *The Dragon's Gift: The Real Story of China in Africa* (2009) is equally more a China-Africa discourse than it is an Africa-China one. One needs only to place emphasis on the "*The Real Story of China in Africa*" as opposed to the potential "The real story of Africa in China" to uphold the "China-Africa" rather than "Africa-China" inclination of the earlier book. Accordingly, in keeping with the China in Africa focus of *Will Africa Feed China*, I talk of China-Africa rather than Africa-China in this paper.

Brautigam in the China-Africa field

Brautigam has focused on the China-Africa topic for over two decades. Her 1998 work, *Chinese Aid and African Development: Exporting Green Revolution*, is one of the few pioneer works in the field. In her seminal and probably most quoted work, *The Dragon's Gift*, Brautigam (2009) narrates how she lived in Taiwan in 1979, crossed over to Mainland China in the early 1980s and did a stint in Liberia. The first-person anecdotes in the book speak of an old China-hand rather than one who jumped onto the China-Africa bandwagon when the topic became fashionable in the new Millennium. Brautigam's influence has gone beyond just purely academic publications. Bridging academia and practice (praxis), she has testified before the United States (US) senate on China's role in Africa and implications for America (for instance, Brautigam, 2011a) and consulted for a host of supranational

organisations and think tanks such as the African Development Fund Group, Norway's Norfund and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). She initiated and heads one of the prominent projects in the field, the China Africa Research Initiative at the School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS-CARI)¹, Johns Hopkins University, which has since 2014 accumulated copious amounts of data on various aspects of China-Africa economic engagements. She is active in the digital media space via her blog, China-Africa: The Real Story². The open-source video-sharing internet site, Youtube, captures her delivering lectures in the US, Europe and Africa on the topic.

From the extensive list of publications, it is evident that Brautigam started off in the economic field with a focus on Chinese aid to Africa and in the agriculture field specifically. After time her work shows diversification into other areas of Chinese investments in Africa such as industrialisation (especially with regard to China's special economic zones in Africa) and other forms of infrastructure. It is also evident from her work that she has branched out into general commentary rather than a narrow focus on her original pursuits – aid and agriculture. One senses that having studied and researched the field for a long period of time, Brautigam now inductively uses knowledge of China-Africa aid and agriculture as the springboard for discussions on issues such as history, finance, migration, geopolitics, media and communications and others.

Increasingly, a cross-cutting theme in Brautigam's work is fact-checking, investigation and detective work that calls to attention and debunks taken-for-granted myths about Chinese interests in Africa. At a recent forum entitled *Feeding Frenzy – Fictions & Facts about China, Africa & the Media*³ she explained her work as being comparable to that of an investigative journalist, while lamenting that her reading of a number of journalistic pieces indicated that little investigative work and fact-checking went into the reporting. In tandem with the rise of online news and information platforms, especially blogs, fact-checking has risen fast enough to become a definitive form of journalism (See Graves, 2013; Spivak, 2012). In Africa, an example of a media content fact-checking organisation is Africa Check⁴ which verifies claims made by newsmakers on the continent, including those relating to

China in Africa.

For the purposes of the current paper we can refer to Brautigam as a China-Africa scholar generally inclined towards economic engagements, increasingly diversifying to comment on general or rather broader issues but, more importantly for the current paper, committed to correcting media-based wrong impressions in the field. To be certain, Brautigam did not pioneer the “myth-busting” tradition in the China-Africa scholarship as witnessed by earlier works such as *The Chinese Role in the Congo: Fact or Fiction* (Max, 1965), *The Fact and Fiction of Sino-African Energy Relations* (Erica, 2007) and, *State, Myth, and Agency in the Construction of Chinese South African Identities, 1948-1994* (Park, 2008), among others. However, Brautigam has emerged as something of an evangelist in separating fact from fiction in the field. Just punch in the word “myth” in the search bar of her popular blog and you see myth-busting written large. Crucially, it would appear that Brautigam’s refocus on the China in Africa story convinced her that myths needed to be debunked. In short order, she would publish journal and position papers focusing on discrediting myths. These works include: *Green Dreams: Myth and Reality in China’s Agricultural Investment in Africa*; *Rumours and Realities of Chinese Agricultural Engagement in Mozambique*; and *China in Africa: Seven Myths* (Brautigam and Zhang, 2013; Brautigam and Ekman, 2012; Brautigam, 2011c). This is not to mention blog posts such as “*China in Africa: Five Myths*”, “*Mysteries of the China Africa Development Fund*” and “*Mysterious Chinese Imports from Africa?*”⁵

Right from the acknowledgement section of *The Dragon’s Gift*, Brautigam was concerned about “a troubling picture [that] arose based on a sometimes sensational mix of fact and fiction, all circulating rapidly through cyberspace ... [so much so that she was] pushed to return to a topic [she had] first began to study in the 1980s” (Brautigam, 2009). She goes on to point out how media organisations such as the *Associated Press* and the *Christian Science Monitor* repeated one Chinese financing project several times or mistook a figure in Renminbi (RMB) and captured it in exact terms in US dollars (Brautigam, 2009: 177-178). This is but one instance in *The Dragon’s Gift* where Brautigam identifies media misreporting as a problem in crafting perceptions about China in Africa. This said, however, it is worth noting that

while her 2009 book alluded to the separation of fact and fiction in China-Africa engagements at a time the relations were on a meteoric rise, her latest book – *Will Africa Feed China?* – is much more pointed in puncturing often hyperbolic suppositions. While *The Dragon's Gift* generally and fleetingly exposed erroneous media and popular generated yarns, *Will Africa Feed China?* is forthright about media-generated exaggerations.

Brautigam's focus on the veracity of figures has not been without controversy. In an attempt to shine light on China's financial juggernaut, the US-based Centre for Global Development initiated a project dubbed "AidData" in which they proposed using a media-based, crowd-sourced data collection method as a pathway to putting numbers to Chinese engagements in Africa in view of the paucity of development finance statistics from official Chinese sources (Strange et al., 2013). In the report, the researchers concluded that China had invested US\$ 75 billion in Africa between 2000 and 2011. In a series of pieces on her blog, Brautigam responded strongly repudiating what she referred to as "rubbery numbers" that would be and were being bandied around as factual⁶ when they were incorrect. The AidData researchers responded with their own criticism⁷ of Brautigam and in defence of their methodology. This illustrates how the scale of Chinese economic engagements in Africa is contested space.

The new book can essentially be read as a continuation and deepening of the repudiation of the harmful role of the media in circulating inaccurate stories about "Chinese land grab" in Africa. Before attempting a media-focused appraisal of *Will Africa Feed China?*, it is worthwhile summarising reviews on the book since its October 2015 release.

A review of reviews

As expected, reviewers have appraised the book in opposing ways. Positive reviews, with an eye on the buyer's pockets, are expected from the publisher, booksellers and book endorsers – and there have been no disappointments in this regard. Independent reviewers may, however, provide a detached barometer on how the book has been received. One reviewer concludes that "the prose flows well" but a "narrow" focus

on “proving a negative” and approaching the topic from the Chinese rather than the African end of things are drawbacks (Pilling, 2016). The same reviewer also states that Brautigam focused on agriculture to the exclusion of other Chinese interests in Africa. This is echoed by another reviewer who expected far more than the book offered, the argument being that she could/should have prescribed some pro-African agricultural development recommendations (Sy, 2015). Another reviewer is in agreement with the book and uses Brautigam’s debunking of media myths to throw in their own observations on how and why media and civil society are forces of negativity (Weng, 2015). This perspective coheres with the often-stated perspective by Chinese officials who miss no opportunity charge that Western media is opposed to the Africa-China cooperation for instance and that China must develop its own media so as to be in full control of its own message rather than relying on Western media (Farah and Mosher, 2010: 10; Grassi, 2014: 5; Wekesa and Zhang, 2014: 9; Zhang, 2013: 81). Some of the reviewers of *Will Africa Feed China?* do little else than regurgitate some of Brautigam’s writings while others endorse the book as “an engaging, eye-opening read”, one that “throws many buckets of cold water on a narrative that many perhaps want to believe is true, to fit pre-ordained opinions and viewpoints” (Anonymous, Undated).

Another reviewer posits that the book would not have been necessary in the first place. This is because the mere thought of Africa feeding China is an unfathomable, rhetorical proposition. However, the same reviewer turns around and finds the book necessary because “there are plenty who believe otherwise. And it’s not just pot-smoking conspiracy theorists” (Tapon, 2016). A number of respected news outlets such as *The Economist* are said to be, well, the rumourmongers. Talking of rumours calls to mind the supposition that China sends prisoners to work on African infrastructure projects (Sautman and Yan, 2012: 401), an allegation that remains popular in Africa yet has never been proved. Indeed, dismissing Western media as having an inherent anti-Chinese agenda, some Africa-China scholars have described some of the Western journalism as “yellow peril” journalism [in which] some of the international coverage is outright racist as China is accused of many sins on the continent captured in the catchall phrases such as “new scramble for Africa” and

"neo-colonialism" (Park, 2013: 152).

It is quite telling to note that a quasi-review-cum-report based on the book by *The Economist* did not push back on Brautigam's dim view of media-generated hyperbole, *The Economist* included, quietly it seems, agree with Brautigam's analysis (City, 2015). A *Reuter's* review similarly tacitly approves of the book, settling for the pulling of "soundbites" that refute Chinese land grabbing (Arsenault, 2015). This suggests that some Western media can indeed cover China in Africa "objectively", when facts and situations so demand.

Based on the reviews, it is safe to conclude that *Will Africa China?* has received favourable coverage. Even criticism of the book for offering too little in terms of scope (Sy, 2015; Pilling, 2016) can be read in positive terms as readers wanting more. Issues such as comparison of how China and Africa fare in the book are broached without being fully debated by the reviewers. A perusal of the reviews suggests they are touch-and-go comments. Reflecting on the deeper disciplinary and methodological considerations of Brautigam's new offering might perhaps provide a different reading of China-Africa engagements.

The fact that the book seeks to debunk media-created myths provides an opportunity for reflection on the link between the two major variables of the book: media and communications on the one hand and the agricultural sector on the other hand. In analysing the book, one can put aside the "main" agricultural investment dimension and concentrate on the media subtheme. Such an endeavour would in essence mean that the "complementary" media dimension is elevated to main thematic status, while the main agricultural theme is lowered into a complementary position. In so doing, parallels can be drawn between the book and the Africa-China media and communications scholars who have undertaken systematic content analysis of African media coverage of China with results in places such as Kenya, South Africa, Angola and Zambia showing that China is covered more in economic than political or cultural terms (Wekesa, 2013b; Wasserman, 2013; Jura and Kalusynzka, 2013).

The media theme

While China's agricultural interests in Africa is the main focus of the book, there is little doubt that media and communications are a major subtheme. Consider, for instance, the incidence of the keywords related to media and communications: Article, data/databases, editorial, headline, internet, journalism/journalists, opinion, magazine, media, news, newspaper, piece, radio, report, reporters, story, television and website. These words appear at least 112 times on their own and at least 119 times as part of a specific organisational media platform (for example, Sinochem website or *Google* or *New York Times*) or a country's media (Chinese website for instance). Collectively, the "media code" appears at least 230 times which means nearly twice per page on average.

It is not just that Brautigam sets out to establish Chinese land acquisition and agricultural investments in Africa, but that she sets out to do so by closely analysing media coverage of the phenomenon. To emphasise the point, Brautigam could as well have swatted away media coverage on the topic and gone straight for the juggler – the form and nature of Chinese agricultural investments in Africa. Indeed, Brautigam is forthright: "This book challenges four widespread beliefs about Chinese agricultural engagement in Africa that have shaped conventional wisdom, circulating through influential policy circles and popular culture (read media)..."

In what amounts to the problem of the statement-cum-justification for the book, Brautigam writes that "hunger and food security, land grabbing, the fate of small farmers in faraway African villages, Chinese migration" are crucial issues plagued by "inadequate data, all covered by the international media with TV, radio, and newspaper stories of sharply varying accuracy." Media is found problematic in circulating fiction rather than fact, warranting Brautigam's "peeling away layers of myths" in an effort that required "extensive fieldwork" with an eye on "a more balanced and realistic account."

What motivates Brautigam's focus on the circulation of misinformed information on Chinese agricultural investment in Africa? Food, Brautigam suggests, is a highly sensitive and political matter on its own. But things are made worse when the media

fuels speculation about a supposedly food-ravenous China devouring food-hungry Africa's farmland. The real and present danger is that media consumers assume that "because it featured in *The Economist*, *The Guardian* or the website of a famous think tank, it must be true." Worse still, "the nature of knowledge circulation is such that first impressions are very hard to erase."

In an almost equivalent to "gotcha journalism", the book's methodology is one where a media item is identified, re-narrated and then deconstructed in such a way as to overturn falsehoods, errors and hyperbole. Brautigam's approach can, thus, be said to be mixed methods, triangulating development economics with a media-based qualitative content analysis. In these respects, Brautigam has gone farther than most Africa-China media and communications scholars because she picks out a piece of erroneous coverage and firmly dismisses its allegation whilst most Africa-China media and communications writings make general commentary but do not firmly disabuse pieces of inaccurate journalistic reporting. This indeed suggests the need for an inter-disciplinary discussion in which non-media scholars who work on media as a source of knowledge on the topic can cross-pollinate ideas with media scholars.

Media framed as the problem

Will Africa Feed China? is rich in events, incidents, cases, episodes and anecdotes that point at the media as shaping erroneous and mostly negative perceptions of China in Africa's land and agricultural sphere. The telling examples are too numerous to fully account for here and in any case, accounting for all the examples would amount to reproducing the book. Of interest, however, is that Brautigam makes some interesting insights, generalisations and conclusions on her thoughts about the role of the media. It is, therefore, worthwhile considering Brautigam's deductions on the role of the media in China's Africa land and agricultural dealings. In so doing, one can set aside the particular events, incidents, cases, episodes and anecdotes and go straight to Brautigam's judgement on the media.

Brautigam concludes that "media reports are not hard evidence but a mix of actual facts, perceptions, intentions, rumours, guestimates (when the event is confirmed but its scale cannot be verified) and outright lies ... In other words, we face a complex

mix of facts and factoids”. Counting instances of supposed Chinese land acquisitions in Africa multiple times “heralded ... the feeding frenzy of media stories.” It is not just one media item that circulates inaccurate data, but “hundreds of newspaper articles and editorials, sensational statements and robust myths.”

The internet is a problem because this “wonderful tool” enables “rapidity [and] easy access to ‘data’ [thus] the dangerous allure of *Google* have facilitated the recycling of facts long after their sell-by date.” Further, once an online “database is populated, it will be used” yet “information gathered from the internet may not be accurate.” Problematically, “the headlines and media reports turned into ‘data’ that became the foundation for analysis by researchers in non-governmental organisations (NGOs), universities, and think tanks.” When looked at from the vantage point of “realities on the ground”, much of the media reporting amounts to “grand exaggerations.” The genesis and wide circulation of the inaccuracies is thanks to “some of the early efforts to collect data on Chinese investments [having] been flawed.”

Pointing out that “the nature of knowledge circulation is such that first impressions are very hard to erase”, Brautigam argues that “like ... zombies, the [erroneous] stories refuse to lie down and die.” This is despite the fact that some stories reported as fact “melted away like so much palm butter under the hot tropical sun”, when subjected to fact-checking.

In what amounts to the most telling indictment of the media, Brautigam concludes:

But by now, two central points should be fairly clear. First, there have been far fewer Chinese farming investments in Africa than the media headlines would lead one to believe. Some of the early efforts to collect data on Chinese investments have been flawed by the inclusion of cases that were not Chinese, not investments, or that failed to move beyond a press conference or an expression of interest.

The challenge, according to Brautigam, is that some news sources “do very sensational news conferences”, a problem compounded by the fact that “there is little investigative reporting on Chinese agricultural investment in Africa, and visiting

reporters often do not spend the time needed to dig deeply into these issues.” Brautigam is clearly focused on picking out faulty reporting rather than considering some of the cases of accurate journalistic reporting on Chinese investment in agriculture as a whole. It is plausible that she could have found a more mixed picture of negativity and positivity if her objective was to undertake value-neutral content analysis. Indeed as Wasserman (2012: 348-352) has put it in the South African context, “assumptions in the literature about China being portrayed in either highly positive terms, as a saviour or close partner for African states, or in highly negative terms, as an exploitative neo-colonial predator, ...[are] overly simplistic” since the coverage is balanced between positive and negative reporting with a big presence of neutral reporting (also finding a balance between negative and positive perceptions are Wekesa, 2013: 34-35; Shen and Taylor, 2012: 705; Wasserman, 2013: 9).

Media type analysis

Apart from Brautigam’s framing of the media as the problem, another productive media-centric analysis notable in the previous section is that unsubstantiated information flows back and forth from websites, databases, media, think tanks, books and journals. A careful analysis indicates reference to; 1) general media, 2) print media, 3) digital platforms, 4) news agencies, 5) television and radio, in that order. I discuss each of these categories below.

General media

The general media type is here understood as the instances where the book cites or makes reference to media in general, amorphous terms without identifying a particular media organisation or type of media. These include phrases such as: an American reporter, other reporters, Chinese netizens, and international media, in the press, media coverage, press conference/briefing, articles, a local reporter/media, a journalist, and others.

The general media type makes the most appearance in the book, perhaps for obvious reasons such as the fact that media is, in a general sense, a major theme in and of the book. A number of observations can be made with regard to Brautigam’s reference

to the general media.

When Brautigam refers to or draws on “the media” in general terms as well as its iterations, she is in essence referring to the media as “institution”, commonly known as the fourth estate (see for instance, Deuze, 2005). This is regardless of whether “the media” is an individual media organisation, a journalist or indeed whether it is radio, TV, internet or newspaper. It is perhaps on account of this generalised reference that the “general media” dominates all media types.

Differentiation can be found in the book’s general media commentary. Use of the terms “Chinese reporter” and its iterations (Chinese press, Chinese netizens, Chinese language media, Chinese spokesman) is highest, followed by “Western media” codes, with “Africa media” (for instance “Ugandan newspaper” or “African blogs”) being the least. In addition, while reference to “international media” suggests global “Western” media conglomerates, African media in places such as Madagascar and Zaire are referred to as “local.” I return to this point below.

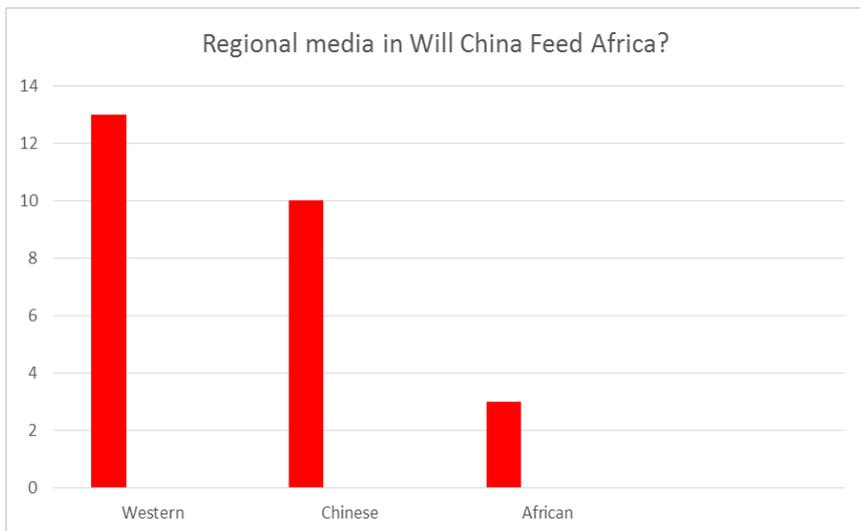
Another interesting general media observation speaks to Brautigam’s methodology. Phrases referring to press conferences make a significant appearance in the book. These appearances are in the context of the grand announcements that “failed to move beyond a press conference or an expression of interest.” As explained earlier, the book’s methodology is one where a media item is identified, re-narrated and then deconstructed in such a way as to overturn falsehoods, errors and hyperbole. Press conferences are particularly deleterious in these respects. This is an important point as press conferences have not quite been explored in the Africa-China media and communications field and this could make for new contributions in future.

Print

Print media is here understood as the mediums that started off as hard copy newspapers and magazines sold on newsstands but have diversified into online editions. In other words, we can refer to a newspaper such as the *Financial Times* as “print” for the purposes of this paper even though it can be accessed on online digital platforms.

Besides the amorphous “general media” category, the myth busting in the book is particularly focused on print media more than any other media. Print media make appearances in the book at least at two levels: as individual print titles such as the *Guardian* or *China Daily*, and in unspecific terms such as French or Chinese newspaper. A distinction can be made between Western, Chinese and African media. Western media makes more appearances, followed by Chinese and African media, in that order. The graphic representation below illustrates this.

Figure 1. Incidence of Western, Chinese and African print media



The Western print media that make appearances are: *Daily Mail*, *Atlantic*, *Economist*, *Financial Times*, *Guardian*, *New York Times*, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, *The Australian*, *Washington Post*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Harper's*, *Economist*, *Africa-Asia Confidential* and *Foreign Affairs*.

Whilst print media, more than digital and broadcast media, emerges as the main culprit in the misreporting and distortions, it is Western media that Brautigam finds

to be a major problem. In addition to a higher reliance on Western media in the fact-checking, the core of the repudiation of media-generated distortions is traced to Western print media. Perhaps the most telling example identified by Brautigam, is a story by the *Financial Times*, headlined: “*China Eyes Overseas Land in Food Push.*” Alluding to the believability of media headlines, Brautigam points out that “with a readership of several million people, the *Financial Times* article commanded attention.” Notably, Brautigam finds that other major print media outlets similarly published unverified articles on many other incidents of reckless information about China’s supposed ravenous appetite for African farmland.

The Chinese media are: *China Daily*, *Beijing Morning Post*, *Caijing*, *the Hunan Daily*, *Peking Review*, *China Business News*, *Guoji Shangbao* (Ministry of Commerce), *China Economic Herald*, *Guoji Shangbao* and *Yangtze Daily News*. The fact that the difference between Western and Chinese media references in the book is just three indicates that media-based research focused on the Western and Chinese sources in almost equal measure. The African media cited are: *Savanna* (Mozambique), *Herald* (Zimbabwe), *Gazette de la Grande Ile* (Madagascar).

Brautigam finds that Chinese print media are problematic for reasons different from Western print media. Consider for instance *Peking Review’s* (now *Beijing Review*) glorification of Chinese agricultural volunteers to Mauritania in 1966:

The Chinese did not take a single day of rest ... When the annual floods inundated the area, they had to wade through the water to reach the plots ... Their sun-burnt skin peeled and their feet became swollen after long hours in the water ... As the construction came to an end ... the assembled villagers thronged their Chinese friends, shouting with great enthusiasm: ‘Long Live Chairman Mao’.

In a more recent example in the mid-2000s, Brautigam describes Chinese media reporting of a Chinese agricultural project in Cameroon: the land they (Chinese agricultural experts) were to work appeared completely barren: no people, electricity, or roads; with thick shrubbery and tall grasses that completely hid the old irrigation system. They struggled through six kilometres of thorny forests to find the

source of the irrigation water, encountering snakes and wild animals. Within two months, they had planted a vegetable patch, found a way to conquer weeds unlike any they had seen before, cleaned nearly five kilometres of irrigation channels, and rebuilt the access road. Local Cameroonians joined the Chinese, learning to drive tractors, working from seven in the morning until nearly nightfall, and forging, it was said, a "profound friendship."

In another example, Brautigam points out that:

even today, Chinese press reports on China Sate Farm Agribusiness Corporation (CSFAC) African investments reflect an earlier era of reporting: They are nearly always glowing; most reporters seem to be overcome by awe at the sheer difficulty of the task. If the company has formidable challenges, they are presented as technical obstacles to be overcome by heroic effort. Political uncertainty, crime, the problem of logistics: these are almost never mentioned.

Brautigam, thus, concludes that Chinese media are a problem because they "often failed to reveal the very real problems faced by Chinese projects under negotiation or those that have gone into implementation." Chinese media also "predictably fail to cover labour relations, complaints from villagers about compensation and resettlement, violent protests, higher than expected costs, or the surprising disparity between predicted and actual yields."

Digital

Digital as a media type is here understood to mean the book drawing on, citing or commenting on information accessed from websites, the internet and online databases. The term "digital" is here used to capture online media platforms run by organisations without being owned or operated by conventional media corporations.

Clearly, a substantial amount of myth-busting involved scouring digital platforms, so much so that digital media is the third most mentioned media type. Some of the websites that appear in the book include those hosted by organisations such as: Land Matrix, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, Center for Strategic and International

Studies (CSIS) (US) and National Academy of Sciences (US), The Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) and GRAIN (Spanish). The websites of companies mentioned include: Hunan Dafengyuan (Chinese), Wems Agro (Nigerian), Juyong-Tech (South Korean) and Sinochem (Chinese). The single government website specifically mentioned is Sudanese. Digital media companies are represented by *Google* as well as general reference to the terms “internet” and “database”, while there is an unidentified Zambian blogger. It would appear that much work went into investigating “Chinese websites” and the sentiments of “Chinese netizens.”

An analysis of the digital media dimensions shows continuation of reliance on Western sources first, Chinese sources second and very little of African sources. Most of the websites are found to have incorrect data. For instance, the website of the Washington DC-based CSIS claimed that China had an “agricultural colony” in the Zambezi Valley without “fact-checking, or editorial or peer review.” Relying on unverified data from the Spanish NGO, GRAIN, The National Academy of Sciences had a “meta-database” [that] included 16 alleged Chinese land grabs in Africa.

The database of Land Matrix, an NGO that tracks land deals, is particularly the focus of Brautigam’s investigative data and is found most problematic. For instance Land Matrix had “some egregious errors” in their data base which were corrected in 2013, but the damage had already been done in that the false information was already circulating. In some cases Land Matrix captured land/agricultural projects as being Chinese when they “did not actually involve any Chinese investors.”

Brautigam’s identification of the digital space as problematic is in line with earlier findings about the role of social media in the Africa-China relations. Wu (2013: 83-84) gives examples of how the death of a Nigerian citizen in Guangzhou drove opposing African and Chinese nationalism online in manner that is at variance of the official Nigeria-China relations. Other researchers have looked at how Chinese migrants use social media to cope with life in Africa and found instances of prejudicial Chinese antipathy towards Africa and Africans (Lu and van Staden 2013). These two examples show that the digital space in Africa and China is

increasingly important, not just as a channel for inaccuracies, but also as a platform for the formation of perceptions.

News Agency

News agencies – also known as wire services in journalistic lingua – are the media types that started off essentially selling news to media organisations but today leverage a variety of online offerings to directly reach audiences.

By now, it is not surprising to mention that the book uses more Western and Chinese news agencies than it does African agencies. In fact, as news agencies go, Brautigam does not use, research or cite a single African news agency. Interestingly, however, it is with the news agency media type that we see a more elevated use of a Chinese news agency – *Xinhua* – more than the use of the combined Western news agencies namely, *Associated Press*, *Agence France-Presse (AFP)* and *Reuters*. It is worth noting that Brautigam's use of *Xinhua* stands in contrast to studies showing that African media hardly use *Xinhua* but rather rely more on Western news sources (Wekesa, 2013). The *Inter Press Service* news agency, though headquartered in Rome, Italy, lays claim to being a global south network. It would be expected that a news agency of the global south would be sympathetic to China in Africa, but Brautigam cites it spreading the inaccuracies.

Western news agencies are found to be a problem analogous to print media counterparts while *Xinhua* is a problem similar to Chinese print media. For instance, an *Associated Press* story claimed Beijing was intent on snapping up foreign land to feed its people similar to how the *Financial Times* or the *Guardian* would report. On the other hand, *Xinhua* reported that “a private Chinese entrepreneur was bankrolling” a big farm in Senegal when, as Brautigam found out, the said Chinese entrepreneur in fact had no farm.

Television and radio

Television and radio are media types that make an appearing in the book are those that started off broadcasting over airwaves although some if not most have since diversified into internet-based broadcasting as well as running websites featuring

articles.

Overall, broadcast media – television and radio – are the least fact-checked media types in *Will China Feed Africa?* As with digital media, no single African television or radio makes it into the book. Western television - *CBS News*, a French television station, European television crews, *CNN* and *National Geographic* – largely continue the China-land-grab narrative. Chinese television makes only a minor appearance, for example, in an instance in which they promote a Chinese overseas land investment. In terms of radio, only the *Voice of America* (VOA) is cited, as having “published a critical story on China’s overseas investments.”

Discussion

Several overarching as well as journalism and media issues can be picked up from the book, with an eye on further research. As Brautigam herself notes, the book should not be taken as conclusive work on Chinese agricultural engagements in Africa but as a work in progress. The stories and fieldwork explores the agricultural investments in 18 out of the 54 African countries. Even within the 18 countries, it is safe to conclude that only a number of cases of rogue reporting were investigated by Brautigam and her team. In short, Brautigam has made a seminal contribution in pinpointing the form and nature of some cases of Chinese agricultural investments in Africa but a conclusive book on the topic at this juncture in time is yet to be written.

While Brautigam offers some views on how and why media get it so wrong, she does not strike at the heart of why the myths arise in the first place. There must be deeper social-cultural factors that impel media, particularly Western media, to spread the unverified information beyond the dearth in investigative journalism rigour. Perspectives on the deep-seated origins of the myths can be gained from two sources: a reading of the media and philosophy-cum-ideology works and a link with the small but growing Africa-China media and communications field. Many communications scholars have pointed out how media/journalism influences society and how society in turn impacts media and journalism (for instance Hallin and Mancini, 2004). Often the media, reflecting society, runs in opposition to foreign nations and interests. Can the media philosophies, ideologies and systems of China,

the West and Africa explain the reasons as to why journalists end up broadcasting unverified news and information? In the Western context for instance, Moeller (1999: 1) summarises thus,

much of the media's coverage ... [of foreign issues] relies pre-eminently on ... putting forward a formulaic chronology of events, on employing a sensationalized and exaggerated use of language, on referencing certain metaphors and imagery that resonate with Americans and on emphasising an American connection.

One can link Moeller's "formulaic chronology, exaggeration and sensationalism, metaphors and imagery and a localised angle" with Western and African media reporting of China in Africa. The philosophical and ideological underpinning of Western media can also be linked with as such theoretical perspectives as the China threat, China's rise and decline of the West, the three worlds theory and others. While Brautigam is narrowly focused on debunking media-generated myths, her fact finding-approach can be triangulated with these ideological perspectives as means of providing insights into the China-Africa media and communications field.

With regards to Chinese media's so-called positive journalism underpinned by hyper-glorification of China and reporting inflated investment figures, a link can be found with the urge for Chinese media to battle for the hearts and minds of Africans. Some work has already been done on Chinese soft power and public diplomacy towards Africa. A question can be raised as to whether focus on winning African hearts and minds inadvertently lead to misreporting. Indeed Brautigam herself alludes to this public diplomacy push in the case of Zambia (2011b), and the case may be that in the push to tell a good tale of China in Africa, facts end up muddled.

The book is more inclined towards explaining the China end of things more than it does the African end of the spectrum. One needs only to compare and contrast Chinese and African sources to conform this. It is for this reason that I would categorise the book as "China-Africa" rather than "Africa-China."

Additionally, the book is presented from an essentially Western scholars'

perspective, which is an important perspective that needs to be understood as such. One of the many ways to back up the claim that the book approaches the topic from a Western rather than Chinese or Western perspective is to consider the media establishments cited. The bulk of the news media featuring in the book are Western as we have seen above. By extension it would appear, at least from the media narratives deconstructed in the book, alarm over China's land dealings in Africa is a Western rather than an African worry. One can indeed go on to consider the book as treatise on Western media perceptions on China in Africa.

The media-based approach that Brautigam uses serves to debunk myths yes, but from a scholarly media and communications perspective it is rather unsystematic. One may pose the question of just how many media outlets that have information relevant to the topic miss out from Brautigam's analysis? Indeed, this calls to mind the lively debate between Brautigam and the US-based Centre for Global Development also known as AidData when the latter released a report on Chinese economic activities in Africa based on media content in 2013 (Strange et al., 2013; Brautigam, 2013). Brautigam has contributed an important approach towards fact-checking China-Africa agricultural engagements: undertake the hard work of verifying facts through extensive secondary research and fieldwork before you publish figures. But her approach is not quite comprehensive. This is where the media-based data collection method proposed by AidData seems a better fit, albeit one fraught with the potential for the double, even triple data citation that Brautigam warns us about. It would appear that the ideal approach in the use of media to obtain accurate, complete, quality and credible Africa-China data lies somewhere between Brautigam's rigorous approach and AidData big data approach. In fact, as one of the book reviewers points out, this would be unnecessary if the Chinese and African governments had data and were ready and willing to share it. In a nutshell, Brautigam has made a major contribution that can be built on in the bid not only to use media wisely, but also in understanding how and why media cover Africa-China relations the way they do.

Endnotes

1. See <http://www.sais-cari.org/>
2. See www.Chinaafricarealstory.com
3. This author attended the talk at University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa, see: <http://china-africa-reporting.co.za/2015/11/d-brautigam-wits-lecture-feeding-frenzy-fictions-facts-about-china-africa-the-media/>
4. Based at the Journalism Department, University of The Witwatersrand, South Africa, see <https://africacheck.org/page/3/?s=China+Africa>
5. See: <http://www.chinaafricarealstory.com/2016/01/china-in-africa-five-myths.html>; <http://www.chinaafricarealstory.com/2015/03/is-cad-fund-sovereign-wealth-fund.html>; <http://www.chinaafricarealstory.com/2014/04/mysterious-chinese-imports-from-africa.html>
6. See for instance: <http://www.chinaafricarealstory.com/2013/04/rubbery-numbers-on-chinese-aid.html>
7. See <http://aiddata.org/blog/a-rejoinder-to-rubbery-numbers-on-chinese-aid>

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