

## Editors introduction

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In anthropologist Claude Levi Strauss's 1962 book *The Savage Mind*, he uses the term "bricolage" to describe how societies draw on pre-existing materials to solve new problems. The "bricoleur" draws on "odds and ends" at hand to grapple with emergent realities. The field of "Asia-Africa" studies is, in many respects, a field of bricolage. As with any form of area studies, it demands a comprehensive approach in which no single field of analysis will suffice: the economic angle, the political angle, the development angle, the anthropological angle, even the engineering angle, are all constitutive tools which seek to articulate the "totality" of the engagement. To complicate matters, it is not simply a question of engaging in one area of study, but two. The field has, for instance, obliged the likes of Sinologists to become novice Africanists, and Africanists, novice Sinologists. And as any Africanist or Asian specialist worth their salt will tell you: Africa/Asia is not a single place, with a single culture; it is highly varied, with different dialects, languages and social structures. This is particularly pertinent to Africa, where the "China-Africa" discourse – notably in high level, official circles – sometimes comes perilously close to embracing "Africa is a country" mode of thinking. To complicate the field even more, the Asian-Africa engagement, at least in its post-1990s market-driven incarnation, is a novel form cross-continental engagement,

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upon which no prior template guides investigations. Until a decade ago, the literature on globalisation, its political, economic and cultural effects, was dominated by a single circuit: the West and the rest, and the flows to and from these dispersed but ultimately interlinked centres of developed-world power. The Asia-Africa branch of globalisation, part of an emerging “South-South” interconnectivity, is a rapidly emerging counter-current – a phenomenon whose understanding requires practitioners, analysts and theoreticians to draw on their existing disciplines in new and interesting ways; in short, obliging them to become bricoleurs.

### **The Centre for Chinese Studies and its partners**

The Centre for Chinese Studies (CCS) celebrates its tenth anniversary this year, testimony to how interest in China within an African context has grown from strength to strength over the past decade. But an even greater testimony to growth in this field has been the parallel rise of other institutions either focusing on the Asia-Africa relationship or functioning as Africa-based institutes teaching and researching on Asia. This special edition of AEAA offers a selection of papers by academics and practitioners who have been instrumental in pioneering in the field, offering an overview of the educational forms which exist with this area of study. Moving somewhat away from the journal’s usual scholarly tone, the papers share the experiences of running such institutions and will be of interest to those engaged in the management or setting up of similar institutions, as well as offering readers insight into how these institutions and networks have been built up. These papers are written by those who have already built up or have begun building Asia-Africa centres, networks and institutions. As a result these papers constitute primary participatory research on this process.

Setting up an Asian focused centre within an African context comes with its own unique set of challenges. One such challenge at the CCS has been forging a stable identity with regards to what the centre does. The centre has chosen as its key focus, the China Africa engagement; the topic has witnessed a phenomenal rise in relevance over the past decade and has a wide amount of interest, not only from actors within Africa but also more broadly, in China, the United States of Ameri-

ca, Europe and beyond. In this sense, the centre has tried to play on its strengths: being located in Africa means that research on the topic can be carried out comparatively easily; it also draws interest from non-African students carrying out China-Africa research, many of whom have made the CCS a temporary home during their fieldwork expeditions. For a long time being the only bricks and mortar research institute of its kind on the continent, the centre has attracted an extraordinary calibre of interest. Diplomats, special envoys, ministers, vice-rectors, counsellors, military personnel, officials from the United Nations (UN), African Union (AU), Europe Union (EU) and CEOs have visited the centre. Our relative isolation, coupled with the fact that the field of China-Africa studies has become such a hot international topic, has meant that the CCS has created a “niche market”.

Thankfully, this is no longer the case. As this special edition of AEAA showcases, there are now not only several Asian-focused institutes within Africa (the University of Botswana’s China programme and the University of Nairobi’s Korea programme) but also an incredibly healthy series of online networks covering this dimension of global affairs (The Chinese in Africa/Africans in China Network and the China-Africa Project). In addition to the institutes covered in this edition, there are several other African institutes which devote at least part of their work to the Asia-Africa engagement, including the South African Institute for International Affairs (SAIIA), the Mapungubwe Institute, the Council for the Development of Social Science Development in Africa (CODESRIA), the Institute of China-Africa Studies in Southern Africa (ICASSA), the Centre for Japanese Studies at Gibbs Business School, amongst others. To quote Mao Zedong somewhat out of context: “Let a hundred flowers bloom!”

### **Contextualising “China-Africa”**

The open-ended nature of the field of study is surely a great strength. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, it seems like common sense that disciplinary cross pollination will better help apprehend the vast-scale social phenomena occurring around us and of which we are a part (this approach has its instrumental values too, in a world where “inter-disciplinary research” has become a term of

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great importance in the world of administrators, policy makers and donors). And yet, there is something lodged deep in the collective mind of institutions which finds the idea of the "open ended" intolerable. That which is often novel, contingent and experimental, can rapidly turn into dogma and orthodoxy. Signs of this are evident particularly in the "China-Africa" discourse. As certain scholars in this field of study have noted, there is a tendency to "bracket" out China's engagement in Africa from various other influences, particularly other international actors. So fixated on "what China is up to in Africa" – and certainly, there is an abundance of activity – this growing body of knowledge, can, to paraphrase Sautman and Hairong (2007), run the risk of not seeing "the forest for the trees". Thus, there exists the danger of "China-Africa" studies becoming a discipline which designates, and thus essentially fixes its object of study: China and Africa, no more and no less.

There is good reason as to why academic interest in, for instance, China-Africa related affairs, should strive to constantly contextualise the field of study within broader economic and geo-political contexts. For instance, China is increasingly engaging within Africa in both commercial and development projects with multinationals from other countries. China's presence on the continent, at least since the 1990s, should be viewed within the context of China's domestic shift toward increased integration into the global economy. China's "resource scramble" in Africa, for instance, goes not only into the development of China's rapidly growing middle class, but also toward massive consumer markets in regions such as Europe and North America. To take a single example, it is commonly asserted that China as an importer country is driving illegal logging in regions such as Africa. However, a *Forest Trends* report argues that a key driver of China's illegal logging is the "the critical role of developed countries, particularly the US and those in the EU, and their growing demand for low-cost forest products, as key 'drivers' in these global forest product commodity chains" (Sun, Cheng & Canby, 2005: 16). These vast global chains of which China's engagement in Africa are a part (and we could make similar linkages in resources such as oil, iron ore, copper and so forth) serve as a reminder of how un-reflexive dominant western discourses critical of China's

role in Africa are. In fact, we might even argue that that these regional and nation-state discourses, which put China and the West at odds with each other *vis-à-vis* Africa, obscures a far more prevalent reality: at the level of vast and interconnected networks of extraction, production and consumption, China and the West feature increasingly as two sides of the same coin.

In this sense, it is crucial that investigations into the Asia-Africa relationship maintain an openness not only in embracing an interdisciplinary approach in researching the interface of these two regions but also in the sense of Asia, and particularly China's increasing integration into what Immanuel Wallerstein has termed "the world system". A rejoinder to this might argue that if this is the case, then the task of China Africa studies is to study the world at large and in doing so, dissipate the focus of study altogether. A key challenge then, is to continue the often excellent research into the engagement whilst insisting on persistent contextualisation of findings. This will help navigate researchers toward the gold-standard of all empirical study: accounting, however modestly, for what is actually going on in the world.

### **Can an African institute study Asia?**

As the CCS is fundamentally dedicated to research and education within the African continent, an important dimension of navigation has been weighing up the large domestic and global demand on the Asian (and particularly Chinese) engagement in Africa against the need for Africans to be schooled in the domestic politics, economics and culture of Asia. If we think about Chinese Studies centres located in, say the United States of America (USA) or Europe, we do not automatically assume that these centres are expert in USA-China relations, or EU-China relations. They may be, but first and foremost, we assume that they exist to educate students and carry out research on China. Within Africa, there is almost an immediate assumption that the task of such an institute is to study the China-Africa relationship. For all its activity, for all its growth, for all its immediacy of need, for all its global concern, the China-Africa relationship is only one component of a much larger field. It is most certainly a spectacular trajectory, and one

which the likes of the CCS is in an advantageous position to focus on. But an important point to keep in mind here is that institutes involved in growing African expertise on Asia will only get so far if their focus is how that region relates to “us”. To bring the urgency of this point home, I was recently invited to China with a number of African colleagues in media, industry and government, all of whom were engaging with China professionally. Over breakfast one morning, I was alarmed to discover that none of the colleagues had heard of “Tiananmen Square”, the “Taiwan issue” or “the Cultural Revolution”.

One could argue that, given the rapid rise of China in Africa, these are obscure, academic issues which do not directly address the needs of Africans engaging with China. A simple counterpoint to this would be to apply the same standards to, say the EU: “China’s engagement in Europe has risen rapidly over the past decade – why bother about learning Chinese history, culture and domestic political economy? We should be focusing on industrial engagement and trade agreements!”. Developing comprehensive Asian focused expertise in Africa, in fact, directly feeds back into practical and immediate concerns. African actors who have acquired a sound knowledge of Chinese politics, economics, history and the cultural context are better equipped to engage with Chinese actors, to inform on policy and media issues and to engage more skilfully in business contexts. In light of this, the papers in this edition by Frank Youngman, at the University of Botswana and Peter Wasamba, at the University of Nairobi, directly speak to this need. Youngman covers the pioneering trajectory of developing a full undergraduate programme in Chinese studies, which comprehensively trains students in Chinese history, culture and contemporary affairs. Likewise, Wasamba covers the development of several full-time Korea studies degrees. These programmes, in line with the “East-Asian” angle of this journal, echo the increasing engagement of regional actors beyond China and signals the growing influence and relevance of the likes of Japan and South Korea within Africa.

Both the Botswanan and Kenyan programmes are charting new territory on the continent and their efforts are to be highly commended. As both papers highlight,

a key challenge is the question of resources (a well-worn theme for academic institutions the world over). In the author's accounts of funding structures, we see both institutes receive significant support from the governments of the countries which they are studying. Given the financial constraints of African higher education (which make similar complaints in the Euro-American sphere look quaint), it is only realistic to engage in such a strategy. However, as Youngman rightly points out, in terms of long-term sustainability and credibility, governments need to come to terms with the fact that the rise of Asia in Africa is not a passing fad: it is now an increasingly permanent feature of the African landscape and African states need to increasingly nurture "home-grown" Asian expertise. On this topic, it is worth noting that within the context of the CCS, one of the first questions which visitors pose to us is: "who are your funders?" This is reflective of the highly politicised field in which particularly the China-Africa scholarly field exists. I doubt whether this is the first question which comes to mind when people visit, say, the Classics Department. Some assume we receive funding from America and Europe; others assume we are funded by the Chinese government. In truth, we are predominantly funded by our own university (Stellenbosch University in Stellenbosch South Africa) which has had the vision to see the strategic value of investing in such a centre. Beyond university funding we mostly generate income through grants and projects.

In the following years, the CCS will be taking our cue from the likes of the University of Botswana and the University of Nairobi, insofar as we too will be engaging in a Chinese Studies programme, as well as short courses, which focus on Chinese domestic politics, economics, regional affairs, international relations, business and management, culture, history, language and, our speciality, China-Africa relations. In this sense, the challenge which lies ahead for the centre is how to maintain a strong research focus on China-Africa relations, while simultaneously branching into teaching Asia related affairs.

This brings to mind another significant challenge for the African continent: attracting the necessary expertise. Until recently, there have been no home grown institu-

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tions producing Asia literate African scholars, we are obliged to attract expertise from abroad (or African scholars who have been trained abroad). As the enterprise of Asia literacy within Africa increases, we will, ideally, eventually be able to recruit the bulk of scholars from within an African-trained context. Additionally, with increased expertise, it is the centre’s intention to cover a broader focus on East-Asian engagement, including Japan and Korea. Supplementary to this has been our co-operation with various other institutions, both within Africa and abroad. Scholarly exchanges with colleagues within Africa, Asia and the Euro-North American sphere have been the life-blood of the centre, exposing our staff to cutting edge research abroad, familiarising us with trends in various countries and, not least of all, contributing to our research output in the form of policy briefs, research reports, working papers and journal articles.

### **The online revolution**

Another crucial dimension of grappling with skills shortages in Africa has been the boon of the internet. The CCS relies heavily on our web presence to both engage with the world and for the world to engage with us. We send out a weekly mail on China-Africa affairs to over 6000 subscribers and have on average around 2000 unique hits on our website each month. As any tech-savvy expert will tell you (in my case, Eric Olander at the China-Africa project), the key is to keep the content coming. While we cannot compete with the Herculean efforts of the China-Africa project team, who have tweeted on China-Africa affairs every 24 hours for several years now, the CCS nevertheless has Twitter and Facebook updates and dedicated weekly commentaries and the regular release of substantial bodies of research. Again here, the web has been crucial: we are regularly contacted by scholars around the world who want to publish their research on our platform. We walk a tight-rope between insisting on research of quality while simultaneously offering junior scholars an opportunity to put their work out. Our “working paper” series is our primary vehicle for this type of scholarship while the largely online AEAA journal is reserved for more in-depth research. The brainchild of our previous director, Sven Grimm, the AEAA journal (previously referred to as the “China



Monitor”) has gone from strength to strength and we anticipate that it will become accredited in the first half of 2015. With its stellar international advisory board and a significant growth in the quality of the articles, AEEA will be the first accredited journal of its kind in the world. The global support from scholars, junior, mid-career and senior, has been overwhelming and the CCS thanks you all for your efforts in helping produce the journal.

The virtual presence of the CCS on the web has risen in tandem with a host of new and exciting online forums focusing on the China-Africa engagement. In the contributions by Yoon Jung Park on the “Chinese in Africa/Africans in China” forum and Cobus van Staden’s article on “the China-Africa Project”, we are led through the processes of how online intuitions are born. What is remarkable about these two incredibly successful online forums is how modest their origins were. The former began with a small research working group which eventually morphed into an online network; the latter began with the weekly posting of an online podcast, which now has a Facebook page with over 200 000 followers. There were no grand schemes here. Rather, it appears as if there was an initial idea of online community for a specific, small scale need, which snowballed through the sheer amount of interest on the topic. Through a natural evolution, with a fair bit of tinkering, tweaking and chance, these sites now play a pivotal role in shaping the global discourse on China-Africa relations. At the risk of making our own centre obsolete, I am tempted to say that this is the future not only of China-Africa relations but of higher education in general! What is compelling about the online presence is the way that these various forums do not compete with each other but rather complement one another, both on the web but also in their engagement with “on-the-ground” institutions and forums. The “Chinese in Africa/Africans in China” forum focuses on scholarly work and debates in the field, making linkages with other scholarly forums and organising conferences. The China-Africa network focuses on the media aspect of the engagement, with the bulk of their followers under 25 and with the co-ordinators using the forum as a teaching tool.

An opportunity for other research institutions, online or otherwise, is how to artic-

ulate their interests with forums such as these. In Chinese official parlance, there is much in the way of potential “win win” and “harmonious co-operation” with the likes of such networks. From the CCS’s perspective, both of these forums have been indispensable in both promoting our own output but also in offering an amazing array of factual and intellectual input for our staff to mull over, keeping us abreast of debates, opinions, conference calls, publication calls, job listings and the like. In return, our centre offers content to these forums (research outputs, conference calls, interviews) and, on the odd occasion, a punchy rebuttal to this or that debate. Another important aspect of online networks is how they, in turn, make contact with other networks, which means at times the work of the CCS ends up in places we would never have imagined. This is remarkable work which is being done and, in some senses, it is outstripping what we traditionally imagine as the concept of the university, fixed in one place, where students come to learn. This latter paradigm, of course, still dominates higher education and academics have been slow to make this transition. However, the likes of the “Chinese in Africa/ Africans in China” forum and the “China-Africa project”, are changing the mould of how knowledge is produced. The CCS consists but of humble students in the wake of these online communities; but we are eager students and will remain open to learning from and working with such networks.

The essays in this edition offer an insight into some of the various strategies which have developed in grappling with the Asia-Africa engagement. It is precisely the heterogeneous nature of the field which is its greatest strength. The institutions discussed here include the domestic teaching of China and Korea in an African setting as well as institutes, both physical and virtual, focusing on the China-Africa relationship. Within the near future, it is anticipated increasing numbers of, perhaps even more novel, institutions focusing on the engagement will arise. The fact that most of the institutions discussed here are less than a decade old, entails a degree of overlapping and co-operation which more established, identity-laden university departments might shy away from. We at the CCS are proud to introduce this special edition which showcases some of the achievements of our partners and we look forward to many more fruitful years of collaboration.

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