

# Narratives of China- Africa Cooperation for Agricultural Development: New Paradigms?

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## **China and Brazil in African Agriculture (CBAA) project Working Paper series**

The **ESRC (UK Economic and Social Research Council - ES/J018317/)** funded CBAA project is exploring the new development cooperation engagements in agriculture across four African countries. The project is examining the politics of aid and investment policy in China and Brazil, exploring how understandings of agricultural development are translated in aid and investment projects.

The project is being carried out as part of the Future Agricultures Consortium, connecting researchers from institutions in the UK and Africa with colleagues from China and Brazil. The research involves a mapping phase that is generating a geo-referenced database of Chinese and Brazilian agricultural development cooperation projects in Ethiopia, Ghana, Mozambique and Zimbabwe. In addition, in-depth case studies of a sample of these projects, are examining the ways in which experience and expertise from China and Brazil engage with the realities of African agriculture and the perspectives of African scientists and farmers.

Comparative analysis across projects, countries and types of intervention are addressing the question of whether a "new paradigm" of development cooperation is emerging, and assessing the implications for the future of agricultural aid and investment policy.

*The CBAA Working Paper series publishes work in progress by CBAA team members. All papers are technical research papers which have been peer reviewed, and are available in open access format. Please consult the project web pages at <http://www.future-agricultures.org/research/cbaa> or be in touch with the author(s) for further information.*

# Table of Contents

<b>1. Introduction.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>2. Literature review and methods.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>3. Overview of China-Africa agriculture cooperation.....</b>	<b>5</b>
3.1 Historical context and current drivers.....	6
3.2 Cooperation principles, modalities and trends.....	7
<b>4. Discourse on China-Africa cooperation.....</b>	<b>12</b>
4.1 Overview of research informants.....	12
4.2 Framing China-Africa cooperation.....	12
4.3 Technology and market optimism.....	14
4.4 Solving Global Food Security.....	15
<b>5. Alternative narratives.....</b>	<b>16</b>
5.1 Technology transfer in a vacuum.....	16
5.2 Cooperation towards what kind of agriculture?.....	17
5.3 Suggestions for alternative approaches.....	18
<b>6. Preliminary conclusions and further research.....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>References.....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Annex 1. List of informants.....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Tables</b>	
Table 1: Formal agenda of China-Africa agriculture cooperation.....	8
Table 2: Frequency of select phrases used in FOCAC Action Plan 2012.....	13
<b>Figures</b>	
Figure 1: Chinese institutions in China-African agriculture cooperation.....	8
Figure 2: Distribution of Chinese investment in Africa by sector through end 2009.....	10
Figure 3: Comparing reported, confirmed and operational Chinese agriculture investments in Africa and globally.....	11
Figure 4: Comparing confirmed, operational, and export-oriented Chinese agriculture engagements in Africa and globally.....	12

# 1. Introduction

Chinese agriculture engagement in the African continent is growing rapidly and having an increasing impact on African development and agrarian change. This trend is often portrayed as a threat to the continent's development – part of a protracted effort to oust both Western and African control over land and politics on the continent. Chinese leaders, however, claim that their engagement is not only good for African agriculture, but also good for the entire world through support for Africa's potential to address global food security, and further, that their unique approach to aid is leading to a 'modern revival of developing countries' worldwide (CATTf 2011). As one senior economist at China Exim explained in an interview, 'Traditional development actors are really out of touch with the realities on the ground. So we decided to do something radically different and very quickly, to be a catalyst for changes and reforms. This represents a radically different approach to engagement with Africa, an approach that can be called a paradigm revolution.'

Whether or not Chinese engagements represent a paradigm revolution, the increasingly influential role of Chinese actors in Africa's agriculture has challenged traditional donors to reflect on their own development approaches. Yet it remains unclear to what degree Chinese discourse translates into tangibly different agriculture development practices on the ground in African countries. Reliable data on the nature of China-Africa cooperation in agriculture can be difficult to obtain, and empirical observations of these engagements is scarce, however, some patterns emerge and initial observations can be made.

Current debate is still largely centred on China's engagement with African agriculture as either a threat or an opportunity. Such debate will not be resolved without a broader body of empirical evidence on the nature and impacts of the diversity of Chinese agriculture engagements in specific African contexts. This begins with the need to understand how the Chinese themselves understand and present such engagements. This research thus attempts to look beyond the Manichean framing of current literature to explore Chinese discourse on African agriculture cooperation. Through voices of Chinese officials, investment consultants, agronomists, researchers and civil society campaigners as well as examination of official documents, this paper explores Chinese narratives on: China's own agriculture and development success; African agriculture challenges and opportunities; and the nature of China-Africa cooperation, to ask how to best engage with China-African agriculture cooperation to improve the outcomes for African agriculture.

The following section reviews current literature on China-Africa cooperation for agriculture development and identifies gaps that this paper attempts to fill and methods used in this research. The third section gives a very brief overview of the institutional arrangements for China-Africa agriculture cooperation, presenting

available data on the nature and scale of these engagements. In future, this picture will be enhanced by a separate mapping exercise. The fourth and fifth section then present narratives from policy papers, media, statements by officials, literature, and informant interviews on this cooperation towards an exploration of the underlying patterns, justifications, relationships and styles of Chinese agriculture engagements in Africa. In the latter section, challenges to the dominant discourse and potential alternative models are explored. Finally, the conclusion brings forward preliminary assessments of these narratives and suggestions for further research.

This research is supported by and will be fed into a larger body of work being carried out since 2005 by over 70 researchers in Europe, Africa and beyond as part of the Future Agriculture Consortium (FAC). Specifically, it forms part of an FAC scoping initiative to compare Brazilian and Chinese agriculture cooperation in Africa and is accompanied by parallel research on Brazil. Recommendations from these reports will also be taken up by a new research initiative under the ESRC on the same theme.

## 2. Literature review and methods

China's increasing engagement with African agriculture—through aid, trade and investments throughout the continent—is now a well-documented trend. The nature and significance of these engagements, however, continues to be hotly debated in media, academic and policy circles around the world. Three primary divergent narratives describing China's engagement in Africa can be summarised as follows: China as colonizer, economic competitor or development partner (Alden 2007: 5).

The first two framings prevail in the media, emphasising China's engagement as a threat to Africa's development, especially in land- and resource-related engagements such as agriculture. They present China's recent wave of aid and diplomatic efforts in Africa as part of a protracted effort to oust both Western and African control over land and politics on the continent. This portrayal tends to dominate Western media coverage. For example, British journalist Andrew Malone wrote in 2008:

'In the greatest movement of people the world has ever seen, China is secretly working to turn the entire continent into a new colony. Reminiscent of the West's imperial push in the 18th and 19th centuries – but on a much more dramatic, determined scale – China's rulers believe Africa can become a 'satellite' state' (Malone 2008; see also cf Von Braun & Meinzen Dick 2009; Gaye 2006).

The second narrative sees China engaged in a self-interested, exploitative grab for resources to feed its fast-paced growth. Guardian journalist David Smith, for

example, wrote in 2009 that 'A million Chinese farmers have joined the rush to Africa, according to one estimate, underlining concerns that an unchecked "land grab" not seen since the 19th century is under way' (Smith 2009). More recently, in *Winner Take All: China's Race for Resources*, Dambisa Moyo admires China's 'commodity campaign', describing it as 'breathtaking', stating that 'The Chinese are on a global shopping spree' in a zero-sum world of finite resources, and arguing that China's 'voracious commodity appetite is unlikely to abate' (Moyo 2012: 3; see also cf Carmody 2011; Rotberg 2008).

Counter to these 'threat' framings, the development partner framing highlights the opportunities presented by China's engagement with African countries, emphasising the value of China's development experience for transforming Africa through South-South collaborative efforts. This development partner framing is seen in multilateral organisations, academic literature, as well as Chinese and African government discourse. In agriculture cooperation specifically, China is presented as a success story, ready to partner with African countries to support their success. For example, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) argues that 'Chinese science and agriculture have much to offer to other developing countries, since intensive small-scale agriculture has been practiced in China for centuries', and points out that 'China repeatedly demonstrated its commitment to helping other developing countries to improve their food security' (FAO 2012; see also cf Moyo 2010; Rotberg 2008; Taylor 2006). Discussing China's engagement in African agriculture, the literature has attempted to debunk myths about so-called large-scale Chinese farming for export. It has repeatedly argued that the scale of China's engagement is still unclear but likely much smaller than claimed (Smaller et al. 2012; Scissors 2010; Brautigam & Tang 2012a), and that most production is currently not exported (Buckley 2012; Brautigam 2009; Cotula et al. 2009). Finally, it has shown how Chinese activities contrast with often-damaging Western engagement during this time, which shifted from colonial control to structural adjustment to a more recent focus on increasing agriculture investment (Moyo 2010; Sautman and Yan 2009 and 2007).

China's engagement in African agriculture development thus remains a highly contested arena. Despite an increasing body of more thoughtful, evidence-based research looking into the nature of these engagements, there is a persistent lack of engagement with Chinese perspectives on these engagements. Whether seen as a threat or opportunity, 'China' is generally portrayed as a monolith, guided by a strong policy directive and ruled by a central coordinating force in Beijing. For example, Deborah Brautigam writes that China's 'embrace of the continent is strategic, planned, long-term and still unfolding' (Brautigam 2012: 7).

This approach persists even when diverse actors are recognised. From research by IISD to confirm the scale of Chinese agriculture investments around the world, for example, researchers conclude that China 'allows' its companies 'to directly manage and control agriculture

production' as part of a much broader strategy that includes joint ventures with local governments or local companies and contracts with local farmers' (Smaller et al. 2012: 4). Furthermore, there has been little effort to understand the perceptions, motivations and networks behind these diverse actor networks. For example, Brautigam and Tang (2009: 705) observe that Chinese perspectives on their own engagement in African agriculture 'contrast sharply' with images outside China, but the authors skim over their 'extensive field research' to provide only descriptive examples of a few cases, focusing instead on general patterns of China's policies. At best, discussion of the 'Chinese perspective' is understood to be captured by Chinese scholars based in China (Harneit-Sievers et al. 2010).

This research thus attempts to look beyond the Manichean framing of current literature to explore Chinese discourse on African agriculture cooperation. I argue that the debate on the implications of this Sino-African cooperation in agriculture will not be resolved without a deeper understanding of the diversity of Chinese agriculture engagements in specific African contexts, and the nature of Chinese narratives on the subject.

In addition to review of academic literature, Chinese policy documents and media articles, this research consisted of 29 unstructured interviews with 18 Chinese and 11 non-Chinese individuals in China conducted between November 2011 and March 2012. All interviews were conducted in either Chinese or English, and translations of transcripts are my own. Though I wrote notes and recorded most interviews with permission, informants agreed to speak to me with either the understanding that their identities would remain anonymous or without explicit permission to be directly quoted. This was done to build trust and encourage honest sharing in what is a sensitive and contested field of inquiry in China. I have therefore omitted names when providing quotes, however, informants' positions and institutions are listed in Annex 1.

### **3. Overview of China-Africa agriculture cooperation**

China has been engaged in African agriculture for more than 40 years. Early engagement was largely motivated by a need for the new Chinese nation to build soft power and recognition on the global stage. Activities were characterised by bilateral agreements and donation-based aid. In return for their friendship and assistance, countries had to adhere to the 'One China' policy, which required countries to recognise Taiwan as part of the People's Republic of China. These efforts played an important role in China's successful bid for a UN seat and remain important allies in international negotiations (Renard 2011: 7, 12). The One China policy is still in effect today.

During China's Reform Period in the 1980's and 90's, engagements in Africa took a 'consolidation' approach focusing on science and techniques implemented by joint venture-supported grants (Brautigam 2009). In recent years, following China's joining of the WTO and the launch of its official 'Go Out' policy in the early 2000s, China's focus has shifted to support for Africa's economic liberalisation and integration into the global agriculture commodity market. This has meant support for development of export-oriented production, experimentation with Special Economic Zones (Renard 2011: 9; Berthelemy 2011), exemptions from customs duties, large infrastructure projects, and Chinese ODI in Africa (Renard 2011: 20). These engagements still include bilateral and aid-based approaches, but are increasingly characterised by multilateral and regional engagements, and by mixed aid-trade-investment packages.

In this research, China-Africa agriculture 'cooperation' is understood broadly to include not just aid, but also investments and trade. Chinese engagements themselves deliberately blend the lines between grant-based aid, investment and trade, and involve an increasingly complex array of actors. To understand Chinese discourse on the subject, it is useful to first situate it within the history and current nature of China Africa cooperation in agriculture, as well as the institutions and primary actors governing these engagements.

### 3.1 Historical context and current drivers

In early forays into the international scene, Chinese officials—led by Mao and his anti-imperialist agenda—were quick to assert that China was distinct from colonial powers and that they came in friendship and solidarity. Today this has evolved into China's assertion of itself as 'the largest developing country in the world' (GOV 2010: 2) which is providing assistance to African countries 'despite its own economic hardship' (GOV 2010: 5). Emphasizing their shared challenge of development, Chinese leaders thus assert a moral imperative to share their experience as they show 'great concern for the livelihood for African people' (GOV 2010: 7).

Indeed, China's own modernisation project grew out of a sense of indignation at its perceived mistreatment by the West. Once an empire of great cultural and economic significance, China had been held back from its rightful path of development by unequal treaties with Western powers during the 'Century of Humiliation' in the 1800s. The result has been a deep belief among leaders that China needed to forge its own path towards modernisation, a path independent and distinct from that of the West. Even as China began learning from and adopting specific global tools for economic reform and development (such as capitalism and the market, specific agricultural technologies, or land reform systems), Chinese leaders experienced that these had to be adapted to specific Chinese needs and circumstances.

China's insistence on not interfering in domestic political affairs of other countries stems from this experience. China is adamant that its engagement with Africa will similarly allow countries there to forge their own path. As Chinese president Hu Jintao stated in the recent FOCAC ministerial in Beijing, 'China wholeheartedly and sincerely supports African countries choosing their own development path, and will wholeheartedly and sincerely support them to raise their development ability' (CCTV 2012). Though this lens, Chinese leaders have continually asserted that China has something to offer Africa, not just because of its relative modernity, but more importantly because of its development approach—distinct from that of the West.

That has also meant forging its own path to engaging with Africa. From the early roots of Sino-African relations as victims in solidarity against colonial powers, Chinese discourse has evolved to focus on the failure and inefficiencies of post-colonial aid and inequalities of trade. As one senior economist at China Exim explained in an interview, 'Traditional development actors are really out of touch with the realities on the ground. So we decided to do something radically different and very quickly, to be a catalyst for changes and reforms. This represents a radically different approach to engagement with Africa, an approach that can be called a paradigm revolution.' Chinese leaders have thus aimed to form an entirely 'new type' of relationship with Africa in the 21st century—a 'strategic partnership' featuring 'political equality and mutual trust, economic win-win cooperation' (Fan et al. 2010: 7-8). Such sentiment is echoed by many African leaders, who make explicit links with China-Africa cooperation and anti-colonialism<sup>ii</sup>.

China's approach to Africa has been to experiment with the approach China has taken to modernise and liberalise its own rural economy. Agriculture played a central role in China's own economic development and sharing these experiences has been a consistent priority in China's engagements in Africa. For example, in *Agriculture Development in China and Africa*, China Agriculture University researchers emphasize the importance of understanding China's own experiences for understanding agriculture engagement abroad. 'The farms, experimental stations and today's agricultural technology demonstration centres [in Africa] they write, 'reflect similar assistance mechanisms and embody the valuable experience of China's agricultural development at different stages' (Li et al. 2012: 234). Similarly, during a tour of in Tanzania, Chinese journalists from Gansu observed how China's experience could be helpful to Tanzania's rural development. 'Like Tanzania, Gansu has always taken agriculture as the foundation for its economic development and has provided favorable conditions for its agricultural development and diversified rural economy.' They suggested that Tanzanian grape farmers could 'learn a lot from a small town called Yang Guan in Dunhuang'<sup>iii</sup>.

Agriculture cooperation has focused on technocratic and capacity-building interventions, and deliberately shied away from social and political issues. China's agriculture growth has involved a mix of technology development, market reforms, trade, and FDI: a tradition of labour intensive farming guaranteeing high yield; focus on financial and technological resources to stimulate agricultural production; a strong state with policy and financial management capacity; gradual strengthening market system for efficient allocation of resources. Since launching its 'Go Out' policy and joining the WTO in 2001, China has promoted itself as an active member of the global community, encouraging agricultural trade and overseas direct investments. Chinese leaders still see the global community as unfairly dominated by a small handful of countries at the expense of the vast majority. They consistently reject OECD aid models, interpreting the use of conditionalities as 'merely the latest in the decades of humiliating experiences at the hands of former colonial powers and the United States' (Alden 2007: 20).

Agricultural engagements in Africa are thus informed by a sense of injustice at the persistent food insecurity and market instability in developing countries around the world. Qi (2012) writes that lack of global ODI in agriculture created a need in this sector and has led African governments to focus on agriculture investments in their recent policy-making. Responding to this need and to the 'failings of structural adjustment', Chinese engagement calls for the need to 'substitute traditional agriculture aid'. In this 'broader concept' of agriculture cooperation, 'joint-venture and other economic cooperation patterns were required and produced' including a stronger focus on the 'agency of enterprises' and 'technological innovation' (Qi 2012: 19).

The message is clear: Chinese agriculture did not get where it is today through DAC-guided aid. It got here through a mix of market reforms, trade, and FDI, and that is precisely what it is doing in Africa. However, researchers caution that Chinese models have to be adapted to local conditions, just as China has had to adapt development approaches from elsewhere and forge their own path to modernisation. 'When copying [the Chinese agriculture extension] model to Africa,' write the authors, 'it is clear that these institutions cannot survive through reliance on local government administrative capacity: these centres, managed by Chinese universities, agricultural academies and enterprises, will have to be managed as enterprises' (Li et al. 2012: 234). For the Chinese, the involvement of agribusiness in agriculture aid programs is crucial for overcoming the ineffectiveness of OECD aid models—the safeguard to ensure a project continues 'after grant funding ends' (Li et al. 2012: 233).

The result is a focus on providing 'multi-level and multi form cooperation' to contribute to improving agriculture production, strengthening Africa's food security, technical exchanges, human resources training, agriculture development plans, and agriculture processing and machinery (FOCAC 2012). This includes a commitment to 'encourage Chinese financial institutions to support

corporate cooperation' in agriculture development. Chinese leaders see these efforts as an integral part of its own integration into the global economic and political arena, driving the country to develop strong diplomatic and economic ties with African countries by playing a new and central role in their development.

In addition to enhancing Chinese political relationships and boosting commercial opportunities for national firms, increasing Chinese engagement in global agriculture is also guided by changing consumption patterns in China and increasing resource pressures on an overtaxed domestic agriculture sector. Though China has been highly successful at feeding more than 20 percent of the world's people with only nine percent of its arable land, its leaders are 'not optimistic about its food security situation' as the country 'faces shrinking arable land resources, water shortages, frequent disasters, deteriorating arable land quality and other agricultural production challenges including climate change' (Li et al. 2012: 245). Even with increased agricultural science and technology and policy inputs, it is still a severe challenge to ensure the current production level of 500 million kilograms of grain per year. Coupled with population increase, adjustment of food consumption patterns as well as ever-increasing feed grain and industrial food consumption, overall food demands are growing.

Agriculture engagement in Africa today is framed as 'South-South' collaboration, emphasising reciprocal relationships with 'mutual benefits'. It continues to enhance political relationships and soft power, while also boosting commercial opportunities for national firms, and increasingly also serves to strengthen Chinese resource security (Brautigam and Tang 2012b; see also Brautigam 2012; Li et al 2012; Qi 2012; Renard 2011: 7-8). It also continues to be informed by China's own domestic development experience and shaped by policy changes within African countries and by global economic trends (Li et al. 2012).

## 3.2 Cooperation principles, modalities and trends

China's leadership emphasizes that its cooperation with Africa follows the 'principles of equality, effectiveness, mutual benefit and reciprocity, and mutual development' (GOV 2010: 2). The emphasis is on the shared experiences and common concerns of two partners who are 'both in the process of industrialisation and urbanisation' (GOV 2010: 3).

Agriculture cooperation comes under this as part of China's effort to 'improve people's livelihood' through an effort to 'solve food shortage problems' (GOV 2010: 7). The focus is on solving Africa's food security through 'fully explor[ing] and utiliz[ing] each other's comparative advantages, expand[ing] mutually beneficial economic cooperation and balanced trade' (FMPRC 2012). The

**Table 1: Formal agenda of China-Africa agriculture cooperation**

<b>Beijing Action Plan (2012-2015)</b>	
<b>Sections</b>	<b>Pledged actions by China:</b>
4.1.3	Support CAADP (Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme) for a 'growth-oriented' agricultural agenda for Africa
4.1.4	Send teams to train African agricultural technicians
4.1.4	Support agricultural vocational education system and send teachers
4.1.4 & 5.2.1	& Build more agriculture demonstration centres
4.1.4	Provide technical support for grain planting, storage, processing and circulation
4.1.4 & 4.5.6	Encourage Chinese financial institutions to support corporate cooperation in planting, processing, animal husbandry, fisheries and aquaculture
4.1.4	Support UNFAO 'Special Program for Food Security'
4.1.4 & 4.1.6	Facilitate access for African agricultural products to the Chinese market
4.5.2	US\$ 20 billion credit line for infrastructure, agriculture, manufacturing and African SMEs
6.3.6	Publish and translate agricultural technology materials; joint participation in book fairs in China & Africa

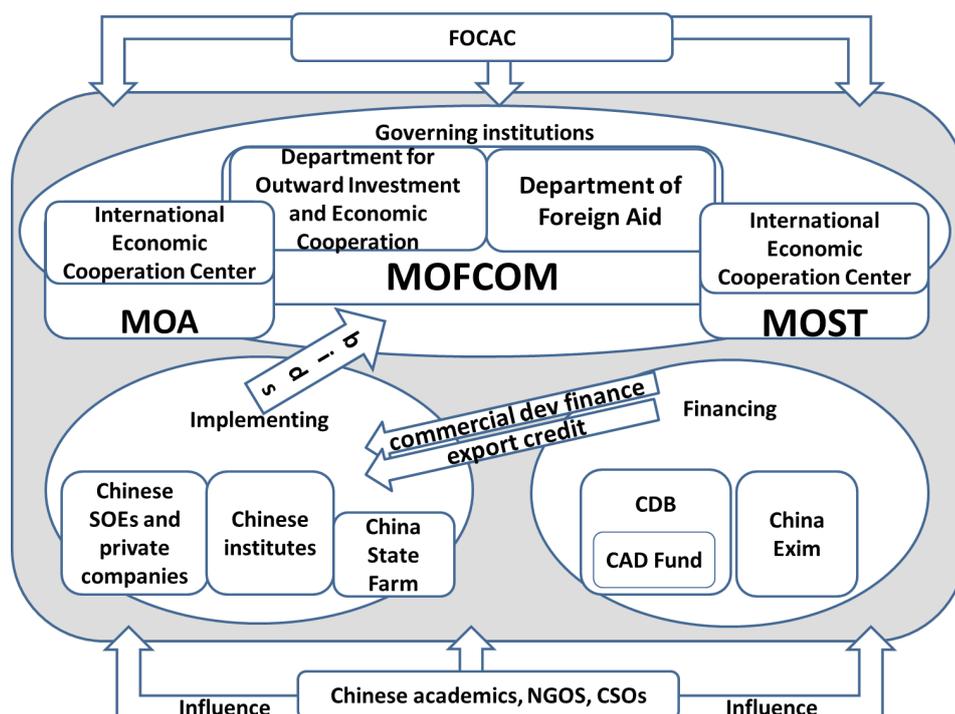
Source: FOCAC 2012

details of China's current pledges to African are listed in Table 2.

To Chinese leadership, economic and trade cooperation is a prerequisite for 'promoting economic development and social progress' (GOV 2010: 2). Chinese ministries, banks and companies are thus all involved in agriculture cooperation with African countries. Though there are at least 23 ministries and agencies involved in these engagements (Kragelund 2008), key institutions and actors and their relationships are outlined in Figure 1.

The Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) plays a central role through its Department of Foreign Aid and Department of Outward Investment and Economic Cooperation. MOFCOM coordinates with the Ministry of Agriculture (MOA) and Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST) for agriculture programs, which are then implemented by Chinese institutes, state owned enterprises (SOEs) and private firms through a competitive bidding processes. Financing for the implementation is partially sourced from the China Development Bank (CDB) and the Export Import Bank of China (China EXIM)

**Figure 1: Chinese institutions in China-African agriculture cooperation**



in the form of commercial development finance and export credit. The China-Africa Development Fund (CAD Fund) was established in 2006 to promote the development of Sino-African commercial ties. It has a strategic agreement with the China State Farm Agribusiness Corporation to establish a joint company to make agriculture investments, but according to Brautigam and Tang (2012) these have not yet materialised.

The Forum on China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) was established in 2000 to interface with African partners and relevant Chinese actors. FOCAC ministerial are held every three years alternating between Beijing and African countries and continue to provide an important policy framework and platform for engagement. Under the raised profile of China-Africa relations provided by FOCAC, all of the institutional actors outlined above have received a boost to their cooperation efforts. Banks are supported in their lending to overseas companies, and companies receive preferential treatment to invest and trade (Renard 2011: 12). Increasingly, Chinese NGOs and researchers are developing interest in these engagements as well, and are beginning to explore ways to influence key actors and policies governing them.

## Aid

Given the mixed nature of these engagements, and because Chinese aid definitions differ from those of DAC/OECD and figures are not disclosed in detail, it can be difficult to obtain reliable data on the scale and depth of China-Africa agriculture cooperation. This is further complicated by the fact that assistance to Africa is administered by at least two dozen agencies and ministries (Kragelund 2008). Where aid projects are explicitly discussed in Chinese government and media reports, the tendency is to emphasize impacts on the ground, for example, citing numbers of infrastructure projects built, trainings held, or people treated for a disease. As a whole, Africa has received more development assistance from China than any other region, and this aid is growing fast, however, it appears still relatively small compared to aid from OECD countries. Davies estimated total aid to Africa between 1949 and 2006 to be valued at US\$5.6 billion (Davies 2006). Aid flows produce a wide range of estimates: US\$1-1.5 billion in 2005 (Wang 2007); US\$850 million in 2007 (Brautigam 2012; Axel et al. 2011; Kragelund 2008; Wang 2007).

However large the monetary value, the modalities of Chinese aid on the continent are consistent with the historical and political context of Sino-African relations, mixing diplomacy and economic relations. According to the State Council, by the end of 2009 China had 142 agriculture projects in Africa and had provided 'a large amount' of agriculture equipment and materials (GOV 2010: 7). Agriculture aid comes in both monetary and in-kind forms to support food production, breeding, storage and transport, and infrastructure development, as well as in the form of agriculture equipment, trainings,

technical assistance and scholarships (GOV 2010: 7). Chinese banks play a key role as well, offering financing services in agriculture and financing agriculture development projects (Brautigam 2012; Berthelemy 2011: 11).

Though aid is not tied to governance or policy requirements in recipient countries, China only provides aid to countries that recognise the One China policy – currently 49 countries in Africa (Brautigam 2012)—highlighting the importance China places on its diplomatic relations in the region. Commercial interests can also be seen in China's monetary aid which is tied to the use of Chinese goods and services. Indeed, Chinese 'aid' has often been criticised as being tied to commodities, with large lines of export buyers' credit sometimes secured with commodities, especially in resource-rich countries such as Angola, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Equatorial Guinea. Though the financing often goes to fund Chinese imports to these countries, or to Chinese companies to develop projects locally, it is important to note that these credits are usually not resource concessions. Rather, they are agreements for commodity exports, acting 'as a kind of complicated long-term trade arrangement, with financing up front' (Brautigam 2011a). As such, these arrangements should not be interpreted as aid.

## Trade

Trade has been rising in significance since 1974 following Chinese liberalisation (Renard 2011: 8). Total trade between China and Africa has grown rapidly, from US\$12.14 million in 1950 to US\$1 billion in 1980, then US\$10 billion in 2000 to a reported US\$100 billion in 2008 (GOV 2010: 3). Recent Ministry of Commerce figures put trade at US\$166.3 billion in 2011 (Mu 2012b; PDO 2011), this represents a 63 percent increase over 2009 when China became Africa's largest single trade partner (GOV 2010: 3). This can be compared with Africa's still 'marginal' role in relation to China's other trading partners (Renard 2011: 18). Indeed, this trade relationship is growing faster and represents a larger share of total trade for Africa than it does for China. In 2008, trade with Africa represented 4.2 percent of China's total foreign trade, up from 2.2 percent in 2000, while trade with China represented 10.4 percent of Africa's total foreign trade, up from 3.8 percent in 2000 (GOV 2010: 3).

Agriculture trade is particularly emphasized in this relationship, with, for example, agriculture trade increasing 25 percent in 2009 even while total trade with Africa decreased due to the global financial crisis (GOV 2010: 3). China emphasizes its role as a 'stable market' for African exports, especially of 'local specialties' (GOV 2010: 3), and provides zero tariff imports of a wide range of agriculture goods from 45 Least Developed Country partners since 2005<sup>iv</sup>. Indeed, though Europe is still Africa's leading trade partner, its share of exports has fallen sharply in recent years and continues to decline. Despite rapid increases in Sino-African trade, however,

agriculture exports to China only represent about three percent of African's total agricultural exports, with those exports concentrated in a limited number of countries and focused on only a handful of products (Renard 2011: 25). More detailed empirical analysis is needed to provide insight into the impacts of this trade on African economies, including how China will shape export patterns, such as African specialisation or diversification in the future.

## Investment

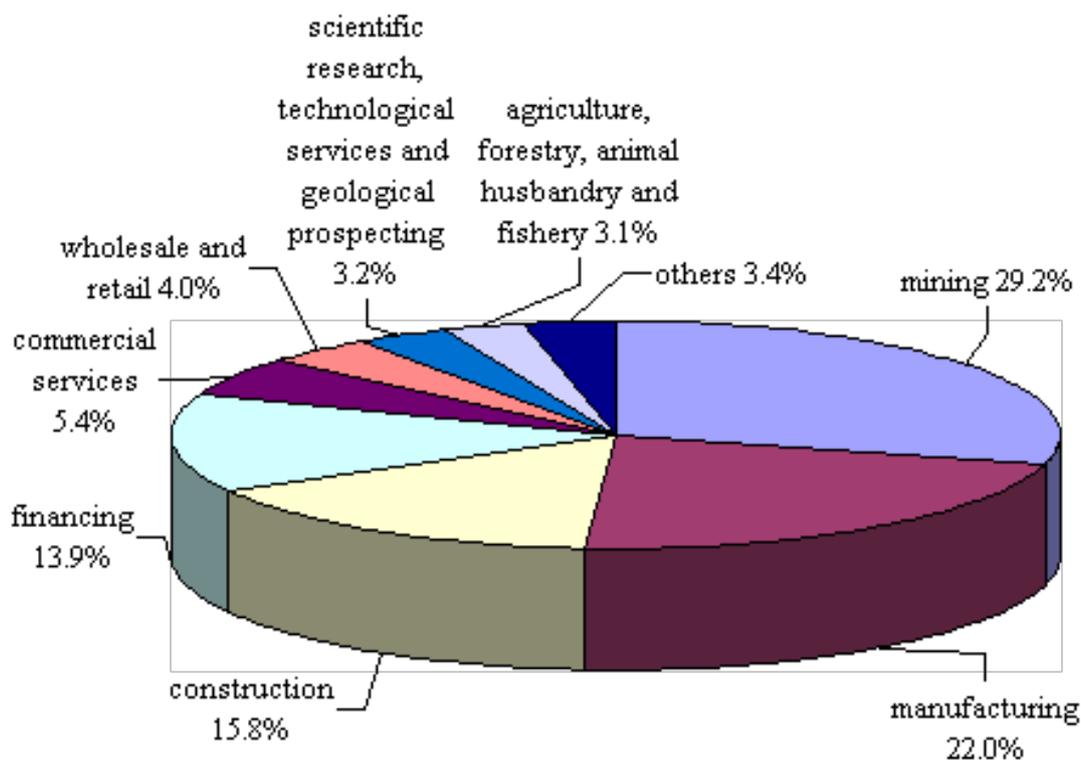
Investment is also increasing rapidly, covering 49 African countries in a wide range of sectors by a diversity of actors including SOEs, private enterprises and individuals (GOV 2010: 4). Total Chinese investment in Africa through 2003 was US\$490 million, rising to US\$9.33 billion by 2009 (GOV 2010: 4). This compared to accumulated African investment in China of US\$9.93 billion in 2009 (GOV 2010: 4). In 2011, Chinese investments in Africa are calculated at US\$14.7 billion from over 2000 enterprises (Mu2012b). While agriculture, forestry, animal husbandry and fishery combined only represented 3.1 percent of the total in 2009 (Figure 2), agriculture has been identified as a 'core' focus for future investments (Ncube 2012).

Chinese agriculture investment figures have also been a source of much confusion, with many large scale, food crop investment proposals being cited as operational Chinese 'land grabs' for export back to China. Increasing evidence, however, suggests that China is not engaged in large-scale African farming for export (Scissors 2010;

Brautigam and Tang 2012a; Brautigam 2009; Cotula et al. 2009; Large 2008. Deborah Brautigam has been rigorously fact-checking reports of Chinese land grabbing in Africa, and repeatedly finds that the scale of investments are much smaller than claimed, and further that where agriculture investments do exist, most production is currently not exported. Similarly, researchers at the International Institute for Sustainable Development attempted to verify reports of 86 large-scale Chinese agriculture projects covering 9 million hectares of land worldwide (Smaller et al. 2012). They were only able to confirm the existence of 54 Chinese projects covering 4.9 million hectares of land. Of those 54 projects worldwide, only 32 (covering 1.4 million ha) are operational and only 463,792ha (nine percent) are in Africa (Figure 3). Contrary to media reports focusing on China's takeover of Africa, the vast majority of Chinese agriculture investments globally are in Asia and Latin America.

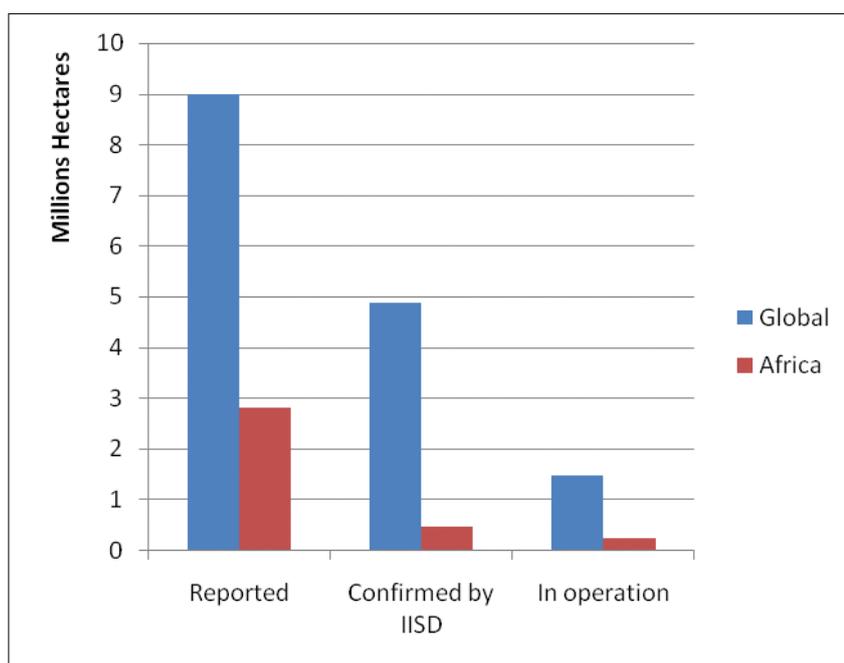
Furthermore, none of the largest scale investments (those over 100,000 hectares) are in Africa. The study listed three Chinese/African investments that reach 100,000 hectares. However, one for biofuels in the Democratic Republic of Congo is on hold, another for maize and sorghum in Zimbabwe is not yet operational, and the third — for hybrid rice and wheat in Mali — is actually a Libyan investment which has employed Chinese workers to help with the construction of the site and to supervise 'modern rice production technologies' using 'Chinese production techniques.' The bilateral agreement between Mali and Libya explicitly forbids

**Figure 2: Distribution of Chinese investment in Africa by sector through end 2009**



Data from (GOV 2010: 4)

**Figure 3: Comparing reported, confirmed and operational Chinese agriculture investments in Africa and globally**



Data from IISD 2012; see also Buckley 2012

Libya from transferring the land to a third party (Farm Land Grab 2010; Diallo and Mushinzimana 2009).

The next largest investment listed is for 60,000 hectares of export-oriented sesame production in Senegal. However, according to my own field work in 2010, and subsequent email correspondence with informants in the country, this is not an investment in a ‘sprawling 60,000 hectare farm’ as reported in the Chinese media, rather, it is an outcropping scheme with multiple collectives of farmers receiving inputs of seeds and fertilizers from the Chinese company, and support from the Senegalese government in the form of trainings, technical guidance, and credit guarantees. Indeed, in its first year in operation in 2009, the scheme engaged 200,000 smallholder farmers over 35,000 hectares of land. The aim was to cover 60,000 hectares of land and produce 150,000 tons of sesame by 2013. It is unclear whether this target has been reached, as the scheme faced difficulties from the start<sup>v</sup>.

Only three other Chinese agriculture investments in Africa break 20,000 hectares. These are in Ethiopia, Madagascar, and Mali, growing sugarcane and biofuels for local and export markets, including regional and EU markets. Ongoing research at the International Institute for Environment and Development suggests the Ethiopian project (25,000 hectares for export-oriented sugarcane) may have been cancelled<sup>vi</sup>.

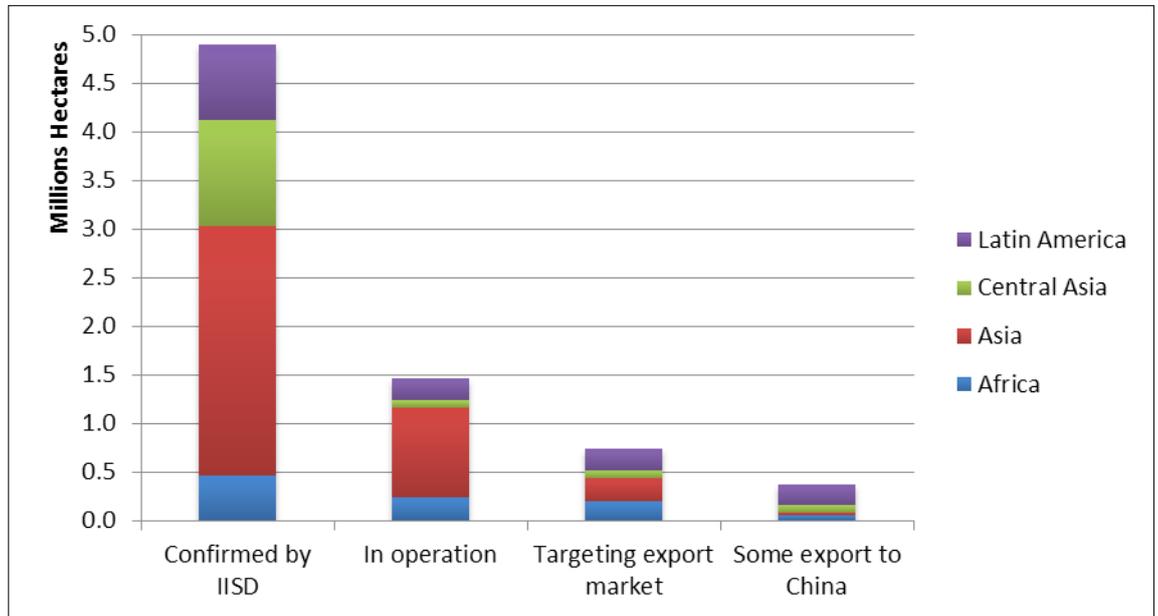
Even where large-scale Chinese agriculture investments do exist and investment details can be obtained, research often confuses projects that have been proposed but cancelled or not yet in operation with those that are actually operational. Furthermore, the mixing of investments, aid and trade can lead to

conflated ‘investment’ figures from projects which include private sector involvement but which are not commercial ventures and get most of their financing through grants or in-kind donations. For example, the IISD report lumps private investments with government demonstration farms; food and non-food production; export-oriented with local-oriented production; and a variety of investment approaches including land leases, outgrower schemes, and even projects owned by third parties that employ Chinese (as in the Mali example).

Purely export-oriented leases for food crops — the root of popular concern — cover far smaller areas. Figure 4 compares IISD’s numbers for confirmed, operational and export-oriented engagements. Of 32 confirmed operational projects, only 15 target export markets (741,880 hectares). Of those, only half (376,613 hectares) export to China, and these are not strictly land concessions. They are the Senegal sesame outgrower scheme, two projects in Asia producing rubber; two in Russia producing rice, wheat, barley, soy and maize; and two in Brazil producing soybeans and rice for animal feed, biodiesel and cooking oil. Thus, of the 54 ‘confirmed’ Chinese agriculture ‘investments’, only four appear to be operational commercial land-leases focusing a portion of production on food crops for export to China.

Focusing on numbers and aggregate size of Chinese aid, trade and investment masks the diversity of Chinese agricultural engagements and fosters misunderstanding. Furthermore, it tells us little about why these engagements are happening, and what appropriate policy responses could ensure positive environment and development impacts for farmers and communities on the ground. Journalists, researchers, and policymakers would do better to move from questioning what ‘China’ is doing,

**Figure 4: Comparing confirmed, operational, and export-oriented Chinese agriculture engagements in Africa and globally**



Data from IISD 2012; see also Buckley 2012

to asking what different Chinese actors are doing. And rather than assuming motivations, we need to start actually asking what those motivations are.

## 4. Discourse on China-Africa cooperation

To build an understanding of the patterns and motivations underlying Chinese agriculture cooperation with Africa, it is useful to analyse how different Chinese actors talk about these engagements, how they envision African agriculture, and how they understand China's place in global agriculture and food security. Towards this, the rest of this paper explores the narratives behind the patterns discussed above, presenting the motivations and discourses of various Chinese actors for engaging in African agriculture.

### 4.1 Overview of research informants

Of the 29 informants in this research, 22 (76 percent) had travelled to Africa for work at least once, with several having lived in one or more African country for one year or longer. Among 18 Chinese informants, those with direct professional ties to China-Africa agriculture cooperation included: one Chinese agronomist with experience in China and Senegal; a former Chief Representative of a Chinese state-owned agribusiness enterprise operating in Mali; one investment consultant for Chinese companies operating overseas; two agriculture policy advisors in the Chinese Academy of Science; and a senior economist for the China Export-Import (China Exim) bank.

Another group of informants focused their work on the issues of China-Africa agriculture cooperation, but were not directly involved in implementing it or developing policy. These included a researcher on China-Africa agriculture at the Center for International Agriculture Cooperation and Development (a Chinese think tank hosted by the University of International Business and Economics in Beijing); a researcher of African studies at Zhejiang Normal University; an international relations researcher at Ningbo University; a government advisor of the China Council for International Development on Environment and Development; and a journalist at the Guardian China office.

A third set of informants aimed to address issues in China-Africa cooperation through work in civil society organisations. These included project officers and campaigners for two Chinese non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and five Beijing-based international NGOs. Among the 11 non-Chinese informants, half were researchers focused on China-Africa cooperation and the rest included a British diplomat to China, an economist of the African Development Bank, a BBC journalist, and three programme officers in international NGOs.

This sample of individuals is not comprehensive, but it attempts to capture and be broadly representative of the wider groupings of diverse Chinese actors in African agriculture. Since no government officials and very few agricultural practitioners were interviewed, Chinese policy documents and official media are consulted for government discourse.

## 4.2 Framing China-Africa cooperation

In the Beijing Action Plan drawn up in the 2012 FOCAC ministerial in Beijing, Chinese leaders set out their vision and plan for China-Africa cooperation over the next five years (FOCAC 2012). Table 2 lists the frequency of select words used in this document. ‘Cooperation’ is the most frequently used word, framed as occurring between ‘two sides’, where Africa is one side, with presumably coherent interests and needs. Other frequently used words emphasize solidarity in this relationship, such as ‘development’ and ‘developing,’ ‘exchange,’ ‘mutual,’ ‘joint,’ and ‘together.’ This solidarity is presented to ‘strengthen’ and ‘benefit’ both sides, with agriculture development and food security featuring prominently as focal goals in this cooperation.

**Table 2: Frequency of select phrases used in FOCAC Action Plan 2012**

Phrase	Occurrences*
cooperation	140
two sides	132
developing/-ment	75
exchange	68
mutual/joint/together	49
strengthen/benefit	41
agriculture	28
food security	11

\* Of 877 distinct words used

This sense of solidarity and shared development opportunities with Africa was emphasised in many interviews as well, especially by those directly involved in implementing projects on the ground in Africa. As a consultant in a Chinese overseas investment consulting firm explained, ‘Chinese companies do well in Africa because we come from a developing country and we have ways of dealing with certain issues [that also apply in Africa]. They are in a poverty trap. China faced exactly the same problem 100 years ago. The assumption behind such statements is that China’s development experience allows for an approach to agriculture cooperation with African countries unique from other actors. A Chinese agronomist who had worked in a Sino-Senegalese agriculture training program reasoned, ‘Our experts and technicians are all hard-working and can endure hardship. They’ve been through difficult times in China’s recent past, so Africa is not such a difficult adjustment for them.’ In contrast to other actors in African agriculture, The Chinese agronomist in Senegal explained, Chinese workers are inherently more able to ‘eat bitter’ (endure hardship) and so they are willing to ‘go places the Europeans would not be willing to go.’

Chinese leaders’ emphasis on its status as a developing nation and its principles of ‘equality’ and effectiveness’ imply a critique of traditional donors who, unlike China, are presumably not effective in contributing to Africa’s development, nor fair in their relations with Africa. Indeed, this was also reflected in informant interviews. As the investment consultant explained, ‘Development assistance in the West is a kind of industry. The West benefits from its tied aid and unfairly blames Africa for its current situation. But their situation is a simple question of development.’ Similarly a Senior Economist at China Exim asserted, ‘We see that traditional development actors are really out of touch with the realities on the ground. So we decided to do something radically different and very quickly, to be a catalyst for changes and reforms.’ These reforms refer to economic, not political reforms, and deliberately target traditional donors’ efforts to promote political change as a precondition to economic development in Africa. Instead, the focus then is on ‘current practical problems,’ assumed to be separate from and irrelevant to political, religious, or cultural issues in Africa (GOV 2010: 9).

This emphasis on the efficacy and speed of Chinese cooperation is also seen in Chinese media reports. Such as this Xinhua article which quotes a Sam Kutesa, Uganda’s minister of foreign affairs, describing how China is helping the country provide rapid development through the US \$5 million Uganda-China Friendship Agricultural Technology Demonstration Center: ‘We think it is a very good contribution to African development. We all agree that we should tackle development fast and ensure that our countries get out of poverty. The support we have received from China is very tremendous.’<sup>vii</sup>

The sense that China has unique development experience to offer is also echoed in discourse of non-Chinese actors. Disillusionment with persistent global poverty and food security problems lead many to assert that China can do better than, or can at least usefully complement DAC aid approaches. For example, South African writer Dembosa Moyo (2010) asserts that the OECD aid model has failed African countries and suggests that China’s approach offers a meaningful path forward. Paralysed by the goal to do-no-harm and apply the precautionary principle, traditional aid actors are stuck in a post modernistic world that no longer believes in modernism.

Chinese leaders on the other hand, still believe in their modernisation project, and are critical of the social and democratic ‘hang-ups’ of the OECD aid regime. As the China Exim economist explains, ‘The urgent need for Africans is to feed their bellies, so social justice needs to be above political democracy. Democracy is just an institution that can help a political shift—it won’t achieve development. What we are trying to do in Africa is to create fast changes in terms of social and economic well-being so that people in Africa feel the benefit as soon as possible. African leaders want to battle the inertia of the past and see these results. We have a commitment to

social justice and that means overriding political democracy.’

Similarly, Cong Liang, the Deputy Director of China’s National Development Reform Commission, explains, ‘Through upholding the Scientific Concept of Development, China has successfully promoted sustainable social and economic development, something that has accelerated the pace of social development. As a result, the nation has made a historical progress in the area<sup>viii</sup>’. Such a view is gaining some traction among some Western journalists as well. For example, Stephen Richter (2012) argues that China’s dismissal of democracy and focus on economic engagement with Africa is a needed complement to the traditional donors’ approach to development in Africa. ‘In the abstract,’ he suggests, ‘it is always preferable to focus on democratic structures. However, in countries where poverty is still rampant, an uncomfortable counterargument can be made, based on the track record of the past 50 years.’ He suggests that if democracy is to come, it must be preceded by economic development. From Richters’ perspective then, the Chinese investments in African countries act ‘as a long overdue wake-up call to get rid of outdated traditions in order to advance to the age of modern commerce and trade’ (Ibid 2012).

These activities are also seen as a natural part of China’s integration into the global economy. For example, a China Daily article quotes Edward Clarence-Smith, representative and director at the UN Industrial Development Organization regional office in Beijing: ‘China has been growing extremely fast in recent years, and the focus is now on how China can assist and support other developing countries in their efforts to develop economically.’<sup>ix</sup>

Thus the assertions of Chinese officials and those involved in the cooperation projects themselves is that Chinese cooperation represents a radically different approach to engagement with Africa, an approach that the China Exim economist calls ‘a paradigm revolution.’ Indeed, in the White Paper on China-Africa Economic and Trade Cooperation issued by FOCAC in 2010, China’s leadership asserts that China’s approach to Africa ‘infuses new life’ into South-South cooperation while ‘promoting the establishment of a fair and rational new international political and economic order’ (GOV 2010: 2). This framework is increasingly gaining traction among the global community as well, underpinned by disillusionment with aid and confidence in China’s development experience.

### 4.3 Technology and market optimism

As we saw earlier, China’s approach to Africa has been to experiment with the approach China has taken to modernise and liberalise its own rural economy. Chinese agriculture cooperation tends to be heavily technocratic because this has been China’s experience too—to focus

on technology and market development, and allow different Chinese regions to adapt specific uses to their own needs. This is underpinned by a deep faith in China’s modernisation project—both in the country’s distinct development approach and in its technologies.

Informants in this study emphasised the importance of technology in China’s own high agriculture productivity, and the potential for these technologies to contribute to African agriculture development. For example, a Chinese overseas investment consultant pointed to Chinese soy, explaining that ‘China’s genetically modified soy is the most advanced. We have the necessary experience in irrigation, packaging, and large-scale land management for soy production, so our scientists can introduce this to the people of Gambia. People in the Gambia don’t drink milk, so soy is a good [new] source of protein for them.’ He further suggested that the emphasis of current efforts is primarily to develop soy for domestic consumption in Africa, but that any surplus could be exported back to China. ‘So if you can plant soy aggressively, you can help both sides.’ Similarly, the Chinese agronomist in Senegal observed that Africa has bountiful water resources, but that irrigation is a major barrier for agriculture development in the continent. He suggested that ‘If Chinese invest in agriculture, they must first invest in this.’

In addition to the ‘hard’ technologies of irrigation, Chinese crop varieties, and farm equipment, agriculture cooperation also focuses on the ‘soft’ technologies of capacity building and skills transfer. Informants suggested that capacity enhancement was also important for China-Africa agriculture cooperation because, as one project officer of an international NGO in Beijing, explained, ‘Africa lacks training and management skills and this is an area where China is relatively advanced.’ Those with more direct work experience in the field in Africa, however, tended to be less optimistic about the opportunities of transferring Chinese soft technologies, however ‘advanced’ they may be. A former Chief Representative for a Chinese agribusiness firm in Mali, for example, complained that ‘Chinese workers tend to be hard-working, but in Africa they don’t want to work hard, and their skills are low. They don’t know how to deal with large-scale production of land. You can train them but they still won’t think about trying to make a profit.’

Other Chinese informants pointed to market barriers in Africa which they perceived to be preventing agriculture development. A leading economist at China Exim, for example, explained that agriculture cooperation with Africa should not just be about transferring Chinese techniques—it also needed to focus on the market. ‘The logic is that if Chinese farmers were to work the same land you would see high production,’ he said. ‘But Chinese economists have shown that actually it has more to do with the poor market situation in Africa. There are no efficient markets in Africa, therefore production is low and people don’t have incentives to increase efficiency. African countries need road construction, markets,

trading systems, and access to needed commodities. These things would cause ripple effects whereby people would change their production methods and technologies. This is what you call development. Chinese leadership and investors also have an interest in stabilising markets in Africa because, as one Chinese investment consultant notes, 'Market volatility represents a major risk for Chinese investment in African agriculture.'

Indeed, from Chinese officials' perspective, China's experience with rural market reform and recent integration into the global economy is crucial to taking advantage of the 'complementarity' (GOV 2010: 10) between China and Africa. Many researchers, especially those close to policy formation, echoed this view. For example, a leading agriculture policy advisor at the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS) explained, 'China has rich agricultural development experience which it can share with Africa. In particular, China can help African countries decide which capacities to develop and which ones not to develop based on global market demand.' From Chinese policymakers' perspective then, agriculture cooperation about sharing lessons from China's own struggles with food security and subsequent rural market reform, to help African countries and producers develop market-smart strategies for this production. 'China's food security situation changed through market reforms,' explained a CAS economist. 'In the 1960s, China experienced a serious famine—at least 30 million people died. The reason was not because of natural disasters or lack of capacity. It was because of a lack of market, because people could not buy food in the market and couldn't produce and trade food freely. China's experience has shown that more efficient food production leads to more wealth creation and increases the quality of life.'

Chinese market ideology, while borrowing from capitalism and free-market proponents, maintains unique characteristics of state assisted markets with a state embedded private sector. This allows Chinese markets to be directed towards specific goals (efficiency, speed, 'justice') in a way that Western markets cannot.

## 4.4 Solving Global Food Security

Though Chinese leaders believe deeply in their approach to agricultural modernisation, and in the effectiveness of their technologies and global markets to support them, they are less optimistic about the future potential of additional domestic agriculture growth. Though China has successfully fed more than 20 percent of the world's people with only nine percent of global arable land, its leaders are not optimistic about its food security, foreseeing shrinking or deteriorating arable land resources, water shortages, frequent disasters, and challenges from climate change that combine with population increases, shifting consumption patterns, rising feed grain and food processing needs. China has reached (some would argue surpassed) its ecological limits for agriculture development, leaving little room for future production increases. At the same time,

domestic demand for Chinese exports of staple foods is increasing, and domestic demand increasing due to shifting consumption and trade patterns worldwide.

It is this double squeeze — from both domestic and global demand — that makes contributing to increasing Africa's food production so attractive. Chinese policymakers think better food self-sufficiency in Africa will reduce others' dependence on international agricultural markets, and thereby also ease China's own situation (Li et al. 2012). Indeed, food security is a central theme in Chinese discourse on African agriculture, with Chinese leaders stating explicit aims to replicate China's own experience, as the FOCAC White Paper explains, 'China always regards helping Africa solve its food security problem as its ultimate goal in China-Africa agriculture cooperation' (GOV 2010: 7). At the 2012 South-South Cooperation International Conference on Sino-African Food Cooperation in Beijing, an official of the Chinese Ministry of Agriculture stated: 'We are convinced that the rich inclusive and more open cooperation in Sino-African food industry will certainly make an important contribution to world prosperity and stability, and benefit both Chinese and African people.'<sup>x</sup>

Informants stressed the importance of China's experience in achieving self-sufficiency in basic food commodities. For example, the Chinese agronomist in Senegal explained, 'China has relatively little arable land compared to other countries but an enormous population, and yet we have been able to rely on our own abilities to feed ourselves. We can use this experience to help solve [Africa's] food supply problems.'

Importantly, this goal is based on an assumed abundance of agriculture resources in Africa, underpinned by the notion that Africa's agriculture is currently under-utilised—an assumption based heavily on China's own domestic agricultural landscape of intensive use and scarcity. From an agronomist practitioner's perspective, for example, 'Senegal has much better conditions for agriculture production than China, with no winter, and three Rivers full of fresh water. Many regions of Senegal have not been developed. The potential production is perhaps 10 times what they currently produce.' Similarly, agriculture policy advisor at CAS explained, 'In comparison to China, Africa has an abundance of resources, so it is natural that an agricultural trade relationship would develop.'

The argument that Chinese technologies and experience might be used to address global food security is increasingly echoed in the international development community as well (Bo et al. 2013). However, the notion of Africa as abundant in natural resources able to feed the world through its agriculture growth potential contrasts with the more stark portrayal of African agriculture potential found in Western research and media, where, for example, 'African soil and rainfall' are seen to render 'much of the continent subpar for growing food' (Cowen 2012). 'In sub-Saharan Africa, an estimated 65 percent of agricultural land and 30 percent of pastureland are degraded' (IFAD 2011: 14). While concerns

about how this 'opportunity' will be exploited and who will benefit are certainly valid. However, China's persistent emphasis on Africa as an emerging market for global engagement has already helped shift discourse away from a 1990's 'gloom and doom' picture of a destitute Africa (Verhoeven and Clarke 2011: 1).

In a world of increasing competition over global food commodities, then, where China has exhausted most of its agriculture development potential, addressing Africa's perceived development opportunities are seen to be the answer for global food security—using 'proven' Chinese techniques. As the agriculture policy advisor at CAS explained, 'to address global food security, China has little to provide in terms of increased production ourselves, but through our methods we can help others achieve productivity rates like ours. If countries with low productivity can increase their supply, then the entire global food supply will be more secure.' As a junior economist at Chinese Academy of Sciences similarly explained, 'In China, almost all land has been used, so we have limited potential for growth in agriculture production. In Africa there is so much land, so many natural resources. All of this can be converted to products supplied to the global market. This will not only benefit Africa, but also global people.' The Chinese agronomist in Senegal also reasoned that 'with only slight changes in production methods, you can have a radical increase in output [in Africa]. So you can improve skills in a relaxed way, little by little.'

Informants rejected the notion that China-Africa agriculture cooperation is purely for China's self-interest, asserting that though China does have a food security problem, the focus is on addressing global food security as a global, holistic issue, not for growing food in Africa for direct export to China. 'At the global level,' asserted the Chinese agronomist in Senegal 'the real food security problem is still with China. We are overpopulated, we have very little arable land, and we're facing additional challenges of climate change. But an export-to-China-model is not realisable for practical reasons.'

Rather, as a country now integrated into the global food market, explained the Chinese agronomist in Senegal, the 'logic is that if China can help African countries become more self-sufficient in food production, or even start exporting to the global market, then in the future they won't need to buy from the global market, so conflicts over food can be avoided.' The agriculture policy advisor at CAS similarly explained:

'Media coverage of these issues is very biased. China is helping Africa improve global food security. China does want to increase food exports from Africa, but not necessarily directly to China. From China's perspective, increasing food security in Africa also helps China increase food security not because these commodities will go directly to China, but because it increases production in the global food market. The point is to diversify the global food market – if agriculture commodities come from wider variety of sources, the global food system is more secure.'

Furthermore, if you consider the scale of land leases in Africa, they are not big enough to produce exports to satisfy China's market. Rather, the aim is simply to increase overall agricultural commodity production in Africa.'

## 5. Alternative narratives

While mainstream Chinese discourse on China-Africa agriculture cooperation focuses on the mutual advantages of each side and the opportunities these create, some Chinese researchers and civil society actors are developing more critical perspectives and offering alternative frameworks for thinking about China-Africa agriculture cooperation. This section explores these alternative narratives.

### 5.1 Technology transfer in a vacuum

Not everyone agrees that Chinese technology is appropriate for Africa, or indeed that China's development experience can be adapted to Africa's benefit. Informants criticised the assumptions of shared experience between China and Africa. As project officer of the Chinese NGO Moving Mountains, worried, 'Aid is supposed to help local people develop by introducing China's experience. But people forget to ask whether this is appropriate or not. Chinese people don't understand African history or the development situation.' The agriculture policy advisor at CAS similarly suggests that Chinese agriculture technology transfer is 'not very effective because Chinese workers don't understand Africa.'

This same policy advisor further explained that Chinese agriculture projects are too focused on technology transfer and not enough on capacity building of both sides: 'There is a lot of talk about African development in China, but we lack information on the specifics of implementing this development, especially when it comes to training local people. We need a greater focus on training the trainers. Many Chinese people now go to Africa, but the local people don't gain enough knowledge to carry on the work that they start. When consultants leave, the local people don't have the capacity to decide and implement new projects.' He emphasised that Chinese leaders have 'grand ideas of Africa' and its potential for agriculture development, but that many of these leaders have never been to the continent. 'The reality may be very different from what they imagine.' In short, he says, 'Africa doesn't understand China, and China doesn't understand Africa.'

This lack of understanding is further compounded by the Chinese tendency to segregate themselves from local populations when implementing a project, leading to misunderstandings and compounding racism. For example, Beijing-based program manager for American Friends Society reflected on Chinese peacekeeping missions in the DRC. 'Chinese hospital staff are not allowed off the base, so they don't have any interaction

with locals except when locals wonder in for treatment. This results in extremely racist perspectives. They have no knowledge of what is happening with the conflict.' Such perspectives, he suggests, are less inherent and more products of the project management. For example, he observed that in this same project, the Chinese engineers who would go out into the field and had more interactions with local people had a 'very different mind-set' from those Chinese who stayed segregated.

Misunderstandings have developed on both sides. A China Exim economist noted the common misperception that Chinese employ prison labour in Africa, suggesting that this is because Chinese tend to keep to themselves, thus their 'hardworking and diligent work habits' are misunderstood. Pan Jiaman, researcher at the Beijing-based Center for International Agriculture Cooperation and Development, similarly concurred that misunderstandings are a big cause of problems in China-Africa agriculture cooperation. As Chinese efforts 'constantly run into cultural conflicts of language, religion, and even work habits (...). It is true that international organizations and media don't understand China. But a lot of Chinese actors also don't understand a lot of things about Africa. Chinese agriculture aid and investments are both good and bad.'

In response to these challenges, the CAS economist emphasized the need for deeper understanding of African politics:

'We always say that China is successful in terms of agriculture efficiency, infrastructure, and market reform. It is not so obvious that this experience is relevant for Africa. African policies, infrastructure, and farmer education are all very different from China. We need to focus more on African government policy reform. This is even more important than technology transfer. They need the policy framework to create strong markets, education, and government transparency before agriculture technology transfer will be successful. This is the most important constraint for agriculture development in Africa.'

Further exploration of the interactions between Chinese and local African elites would further develop this. How are relationships between people formed, and how do different histories of socialism and liberation struggles within different cultural settings create understanding or misunderstanding among them?

## 5.2 Cooperation towards what kind of agriculture?

Also of concern was that China's own agriculture development was creating problems, and that lessons from these issues were not being carried forward into cooperation with Africa. The project officer for Moving Mountains NGO reflected on a research trip she had taken to Southern Africa in 2009. 'In Mozambique,' she said,

'the average land to person ratio is quite high, so there's no real need to use China's model of high investment, high polluting agriculture.' Part of this scepticism comes from her doubts about the sustainability of China's own agriculture model. 'In China, the model has been to connect rural households with private enterprise to develop large-scale lands for agriculture production. But this is already proving problematic in China. There are very high pollution rates and poverty remains a problem. Poverty alleviation requires comprehensive holistic approaches, where farmers' rights and interests are secured.'

Similarly, the CAS economist reflected on specific failures in China's domestic development experience for insights into Chinese interventions in African agriculture: 'We need to focus on who uses these technologies. Africa needs a mechanism to stimulate domestic demand for better agriculture technologies. Otherwise handing out technologies won't have any take up. We've seen this with the experience of biogas in China.' The agriculture policy advisor at CAS was equally critical of the emphasis on technology transfer above other factors. 'The Gates foundation is spending \$1 billion on agriculture technology for Africa. But not all technology is necessarily useful for Africa. In China, rural development started with land tenure reform, not with technology.'

Still others expressed concerns over the relative immaturity of both China and Africa posing challenges for cooperation between the two sides. The agriculture policy advisor at CAS suggested that while China's agriculture technology is potentially very valuable to African countries, it can be challenging in practice to determine which technologies to transfer, where to transfer them, and how to build the capacity to use them. 'Most Africans don't have much education and can't speak Chinese. The Chinese have 13 centres in Africa which provide good demonstration of fertilizers and irrigation. But scaling up these demonstrations is very difficult as they don't have basic conditions in place.' In short, 'the preconditions are not yet in place in Africa to be meaningfully helped by China. There are still major barriers in terms of governance, infrastructure, irrigation, market structure, and land tenure.' The investment consultant similarly suggested that 'most African countries have not yet reached the phase of sophisticated food production, while Chinese companies are still in the early stage of global supply chain management, so are not able to compete with Western companies. They need to make improvements on branding, transport, processing, etc. Chinese companies have to be careful. We won't be there forever if we don't behave well. Behaviour on both sides is a challenge and it takes a long time to change behaviours.'

In addition to behaviour, there is also concern that Chinese actors may be having unintended social impacts through their focus on the government leaders and elites. For example, the project officer for Moving Mountains NGO noted that agricultural trainings tend to focus on those already powerful in agriculture. 'Even where China may have valuable models to share,' she said, 'it is unclear

whether the necessary training reaches the right people.' This problem is compounded by the fact that a lot of the information on Chinese agribusiness and aid is not transparent. As an agriculture campaigner for Oxfam Hong Kong pointed out, 'Transparency is still a big problem with most companies. Overall CSR is getting better in China, but agribusiness still lags behind.'

A researcher on China-Africa agriculture at the Beijing-based Center for International Agriculture Cooperation and Development agreed, noting that lack of transparency is especially problematic because China's global agriculture sector is both under-researched and environmentally and socially higher impact. A campaigner at Oxfam Hong Kong in Beijing similarly emphasized the urgency of improving research, given that agriculture investments also involve long-term impacts. 'Dams have one time displacement impacts,' he said, 'but agriculture involves day-to-day long-term influence on people's livelihoods.' His colleague added that Chinese agribusiness has experienced a lot of problems such as ethnic insurgencies and host countries restricting business activities. In short, 'the Chinese government is still struggling with how to protect the interests of Chinese companies operating overseas. The challenge is to find a case to leverage policy shifts governing Chinese companies, and to make the process more transparent.'

Chinese government actors are also starting to grapple with current challenges to agriculture cooperation overseas. In the 2011 general meeting for the China Council for International Cooperation on Environment and Development (CCICED) for example, members noted that while 'China's ODI enterprises have demonstrated some very good practices,' when compared with ODI from other countries, 'China's investments are generally less well accepted than western investments. They often rank lower than even Indian and Japanese investments' (CCICED 2011: 357) They suggested that this was partly due to the lack of downstream investments of Chinese resource-intensive companies, compared with, for example, Indian investors who 'are more inclined to build fertilizer plants or LNG bottled gas distribution networks downstream from a natural gas plant or refinery' (ibid).

They also recognise the problem of Chinese segregation, suggesting that Chinese enterprises' 'top-down management system' makes them focus 'greater attention to maintaining good and strong relations with local government representatives' such that they 'do not develop sufficient connections with other local powerful organizations, such as the labor unions, other stakeholder groups, or NGOs, they pay' (ibid). They boldly conclude that 'the lack of communication with these local community and social organizations is one of the great hurdles faced by China's ODI enterprises,' suggesting that 'China's ODI enterprises should be better equipped to overcome such hurdles before going global' (ibid). However, their assessment of the root of this problems is rather narrow, suggesting that it is China's small and medium enterprises who are 'are generally responsible for damaging the reputation of China's ODI' through their 'improper practices' (ibid).

## 5.3 Suggestions for alternative approaches

In addition to critiquing the mainstream discourse on China-Africa agriculture cooperation, informants also suggested a range of alternative frameworks for thinking about opportunities in China-Africa agriculture cooperation, and potential solutions to current problems. The agriculture policy advisor at CAS, for example, suggested that the Chinese could help Africans conduct stronger agriculture research and economic analysis towards developing the sector. 'It would be better to do research first and then projects after,' he suggested, as 'the project officers don't have budgets to do surveys to understand what local people want and need, nor do they have funding to work with local people. With more resources, Chinese researchers could help African countries do cost-benefit analysis to overcome the constraints of production.' For example, he added, 'if you want to develop irrigation you first need to improve transportation to reduce costs. This kind of analysis is important for investors and donors (both Chinese and European) as well as for Africa's agriculture development. But this research needs to be done on a case-by-case basis.' Similarly, the CAS economist suggested the need for better analysis of the Chinese side: 'We have a clear understanding of China's agriculture economy in terms of demand, supply, technology and trade. But we need to better understand China's agriculture economy in terms of its integration in the global economy.'

Others pointed to the need for more rigorous analysis and evaluation of existing cooperation, to influence better policymaking in China. One researcher at the Beijing-based Center for International Agriculture Cooperation and Development, for example, is working with researchers at the University of International Business and Economics on an evaluation of a UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) South-South Cooperation project in Nigeria. 'We ourselves have lots of questions,' he explained. 'Will these investments be sustainable? We are interested in the methods, locations, and sectors of this cooperation. This research will help the Chinese government make better decisions in the future.' Others are also interested in the potential for trilateral arrangements—where China partners with an African country as well as a third country or other multilateral organisation—as potentially offering a better framework for cooperation. The Chinese agronomist in Senegal, who has recently begun working on such FAO South-South Cooperation (SSC) on food security project, suggests that it promises to be a vast improvement over previous work he conducted under a pure bilateral arrangement. 'The standards with this work are much higher than before,' he explains, noting that the previous project aimed to provide 'training' but without specifying any clear outcomes from that training. 'This time our goal is defined by the Millennium Development Goals—to help Senegal address its food security problem—and covers all aspects of agriculture, not just a few new techniques and varieties. And we will be following the model of existing projects FAO has conducted elsewhere, so the methods are already tested.'

In the long-term, he envisions the Chinese helping Senegal to develop agriculture promotion centres similar to China's national network of agriculture extension centres. These centres would focus on capacity building for 'average citizens' in Africa, because, he reasons, 'it's the people who need skills building if anything is going to change.' Rather than Chinese agronomists running projects in Africa, he suggests, 'it would be better if they developed a more comprehensive programme and had a plan for how to achieve it. Then in the future when we [Chinese] go there, we could just work for them. There'd be no need to do our own projects.'

A junior economist at CAS, on the other hand, thinks that there is still room for Chinese project-level engagement in Africa. However, he suggests that the focus should be shifted from agriculture technology transfer to a more holistic, rural market development model:

'It would be interesting to experiment with the pilot project which would create a part of that market in an African country. This way we could see how production will work if there was a good market in place, and we would be able to better understand how much of the low productivity has to do with market, and how much has to do with other factors.'

Informants in international NGOs in China stressed the need to improve the governance of social and environmental impacts of China-Africa cooperation through engagement with FOCAC. A researcher at the WWF China office in Beijing explained, 'We see FOCAC as the main platform to influence China Africa investments, so we are working to improve the environmental statement that comes out of FOCAC meetings. They are working with partner countries in Africa to inform the advocacy towards environmental and social priority areas for FOCAC to consider. Coverage of the FOCAC meetings has not generally included the environmental sector. The ideal,' she said 'would be that Chinese investments would create minimum environmental impacts and provide direct benefits to local communities. We also hope to achieve formal NGO participation in future FOCAC meetings.' In addition, they are also engaging Chinese banks such as ICBC, advocating for putting environmental regulations in place and benching Chinese banks with equator principles. As another program officer explained, 'We are aiming to influence both the types of projects and the criteria they use to screen the projects. Where there are guidelines, we engage with Chinese companies, such as in Gabon, where we are holding a workshop with Chinese companies operating in the country encouraging them to produce FSC certified products. Where there were not guidelines, we developed them.'

The Chinese NGO Moving Mountains is also exploring options for engaging more directly with African farmers and farmer groups themselves. The project officer for Moving Mountains NGO explains, 'Our focus is on how to protect the farmers' interests. I believe that we need to support grassroots organizations in Africa and in China to be able to find sustainable solutions. There's a need

for greater disclosure of information in order to help Chinese groups be more aware of these issues and collaborate to find solutions.'

## 6. Preliminary conclusions and further research

China's leadership asserts that China's approach to Africa 'infuses new life' into South-South cooperation, 'elevates the political and economic status of developing countries in the world,' and contributes significantly to 'promoting the establishment of a fair a rational new international political and economic order' (GOV 2010: 2). Chinese agriculture engagements are redefining the 'aid' landscape, moving from a paradigm of development assistance to one of development cooperation mixed with investment. However, the specific nature and impacts of these engagements are still emerging.

This paper has attempted to contribute to this exploration through a presentation of the discourse, justifications, and critiques underpinning this cooperation. A more nuanced understanding of Chinese agriculture motivations overseas can build a more realistic understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of China's own agriculture models. For example, Chinese researchers and policymakers acknowledge that using agribusiness investments as development aid comes with risks and uncertainties. Even though an enterprise approach can make agriculture projects more financially secure, integrating the non-profit and profit making functions remains a challenge. There is room for dialogue around this approach, and need for tools enabling Chinese companies to share benefits with local communities.

As China's agriculture engagements grow throughout the continent, Chinese discourse has contributed to a reframing of African agriculture from degraded and hopeless, to a landscape of opportunity and promise. Characterised by a Malthusian worldview of resource scarcity and a crisis scenario about global food security, Chinese narratives of African agriculture are articulated around a critical assumption: Entitlement to environmental assets is directly proportional to the capacity to produce with them—and further that Chinese are the most efficient users of agricultural resources. In a world facing 9 billion people, with climate change undermining productive capacity, it seems there is no room for any use of resources incapable of maximising outputs. With involvement of the Chinese in African agriculture, the crisis scenario is thus replaced with a new vision of harmony, with China and Africa working together in a win-win project of ecological modernisation.

This framing is further aided by increasing disillusionment with the prevailing aid paradigm in Africa, giving the opportunity for Chinese actors to claim stewardship over agricultural resources on the continent. Presented as a politically neutral concern for the 'common' development needs shared by China and African countries, the narratives are able to largely fence out inconvenient questions, for example, about problems

with agriculture practices within China, or unclear land tenure within African countries. The assumption is that technical interventions are needed to turn Africa's 'undervalued' environmental potential into social and economic benefit.

Despite some debate and criticism about Chinese agriculture cooperation in Africa, this framing works as a powerful narrative because it arrives at a convenient point of convergence for the interests of the central constituents in these engagements: 1) Chinese leaders who stand to gain from increased soft power in Africa; 2) African leaders who will benefit both from increased agriculture production and trade in their countries and from positive relations with China as a rising power; and 3) Global actors concerned about Africa's 'underdeveloped' agriculture, which is understood to require input from more efficient resource-users. Those who are outsiders, such as risk-averse Chinese investors, are being brought into the circle through financial incentives and removal of trade barriers. Researchers and civil society, however, remain on the outside and are thus free to ask critical questions of the dominant narratives and underlying assumptions.

Despite the small number of informants, what emerges from this exploration is a widely varied set of interpretations and narratives in Chinese discourse on China-Africa agriculture cooperation. We see that cooperation is a dynamic process informed and shaped by China's socio-cultural and development history, the on-going experiences of individual actors in Africa, and personal ambitions and dreams for the future. We see creative thinking about how to solve problems and improve on the engagements.

Perhaps then the paradigm shift in African agriculture comes not from what China is doing—or not doing—differently on the ground, but rather, from a shift in how the world perceives Africa's agrarian future and China's role in it. However, it is still unclear how much China's discourse of opportunity will hold true for African partners. The assumption that Africa's agriculture is undervalued and underdeveloped begs the question, underdeveloped by whom? If Africa's agriculture potential is to be developed, how is this potential defined and for whose benefit? More research is needed problematizing China's own agriculture development model and its assumed success. While China has made impressive progress increasing its total food production, this has been achieved at the cost of heavy depletion of its water and soil resources, intense fertiliser use with associated high pollution and energy use, and social exclusion of large fractions of society. It remains unclear whether the agriculture development models being transferred in China's South-South exchanges will replicate these problems in Africa.

Furthermore, if the Chinese model for agriculture cooperation in Africa is to provide technocratic inputs, there is need to explore more deeply to what degree cooperative partners are able to adapt those tools to

meet their needs. Despite rhetoric of mutual benefit on both sides, thus far, China has generally taken the lead in agriculture project design and implementation with only passive participation from African partners. This has led to frustrations on both sides, project failures, and unexpected consequences on the ground (Buckley 2011). There is particular excitement among researchers and some practitioners around the potential for emerging trilateral relationships to address some of these problems, overcome structural barriers and increase transparency, however, very little empirical evidence exists to substantiate the claimed potential benefits of these arrangements. Further exploration of how the multiplicity of Chinese agriculture cooperation modalities function on the ground in specific context is needed.

Chinese assumptions about achievable food self-sufficiency in developing countries shape China's policy framework for global agriculture aid, trade and investments. Understanding the underlying motivations can spur local countries to develop their own vision for global food security and their place in it, and to determine how best to engage Chinese actors to achieve these goals. Whether or not global Chinese agriculture activities alleviate food security challenges, they are certain to alter production and consumption patterns of local farming communities around the world. Without constructive and active engagement, 'mutual-benefits' will likely remain confined to the Chinese and local elites — at the expense of the local environment and farming communities. Development actors (both local and global), researchers and NGOs all have a role to play in developing visions and policies for global food security and sustainable agrarian futures, and placing China's increasing global engagement within this framework.

## End Notes

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<sup>ii</sup> See example from Uganda: <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/736094.shtml>

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.ipppmedia.com/frontend/index.php?!=45608>

<sup>iv</sup> There are equivalent to a 10% tariff preference on average and have been estimated to represent an economic value of around \$10 million per year. (Berthelemy 2011: 24; Minson 2008).

<sup>v</sup> Media report of 'sprawling 60,000 hectare farm' here: <http://english.people.com.cn/90002/96397/96401/6589642.html>; Description of outcropping scheme and challenges in the first year here: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2009/02/11/ozatp-china-africa-agriculture-idAFJOE51A0KJ20090211?sp=true>; Further details on the arrangement (only available in Mandarin) here: 中国·民营企业·首次投资塞内加尔·农·业·领域, (Chinese private enterprise's first investment in Senegal's agriculture sector), July 12, 2011, <http://www.ccpit-ccft.org/newsread.asp?id=313&type=3>

<sup>vi</sup> Personal email communication with Lorenzo Cotula who is collaborating with others in mapping of land investments in Ethiopia (November 2012).

<sup>v</sup> <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/736094.shtml>

<sup>vii</sup> <http://www.ippmedia.com/frontend/index.php?l=45608>

<sup>viii</sup> [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2012-09/10/content\\_15746062.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2012-09/10/content_15746062.htm)

<sup>ix</sup> <http://en.ecdc.net.cn/en/events/view.asp?id=1001> See also: <http://www.fao.org/news/story/en/item/161337/icode/> [http://www.agriculture.com/news/crops/china-taking-steps-to-boost-ag-output\\_2-ar26672](http://www.agriculture.com/news/crops/china-taking-steps-to-boost-ag-output_2-ar26672)

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## Annex 1. List of informants<sup>1</sup>

Position	Employer	Experience in Africa?	M/F
Agronomist (working in China and Africa)	Provincial government agriculture technology promotion center	Yes	M
Campaigner	WWF China Office (international NGO)	No	F
Campaigner, agriculture	Oxfam HK Beijing Office (international NGO)	No	M
Diplomat	British Embassy, Beijing	Yes	M
Economist	Chinese Academy of Science	No	M
Economist	African Development Bank	Yes	M
Former Chief Representative	Agribusiness SOE in Mali	Yes	M
Government advisor	China Council for International Development on Environment and Development	No	F
Investment consultant	Chinese overseas investment consulting firm	Yes	M
Journalist	Guardian China office	No	M
Journalist	BBC TV	Yes	F
Policy adviser and researcher	Chinese Academy of Science	Yes	M
Program manager	WWF China Office (international NGO)	Yes	F
Program manager	WWF China Office (international NGO)	No	M
Program manager	American Friends Society Beijing (international NGO)	Yes	M
Project officer	Moving Mountains (Chinese NGO)	Yes	F
Project officer	Global Environment Institute (Chinese NGO)	Yes	M
Project Officer	WWF China Office (international NGO)	Yes	F
Project officer	IUCN Beijing (international NGO)	Yes	F
Project officer, CSR	Oxfam HK Beijing Office (international NGO)	No	M
Researcher	Ningbo University	Yes	F
Researcher	OECD Development Centre	Yes	F
Researcher	OECD Development Centre	Yes	F
Researcher, Africa Studies	Zhejiang Normal University		M
Researcher, China-Africa Agriculture	Center for International Agriculture Cooperation and Development (Chinese think tank)	Yes	M
Researcher, development	Open University, UK	Yes	M
Researcher, Geography	University of Cambridge	Yes	F

<sup>1</sup> Names omitted to protect identities

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