

## Rezension

**Sun, Jodie Yuzhou. 2023. Kenya's and Zambia's Relations with China 1949-2019. Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer. 260 pages.  
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Reviewed by

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Jodie Yuzhou Sun's monograph *Kenya's and Zambia's Relations with China 1949-2019* provides readers with a comparative longue durée perspective on ideological, economic, political, and social relations between Kenya and China as well as Zambia and China. The book contains an introduction, five chapters, a conclusion, several appendices, a bibliography, an index and ten photographs on altogether 260 pages. With regard to the objectives of the book, the author's principal motivation was to present a multifaceted and complex picture of these relations, uncovering African agency while challenging a monolithic and ahistorical understanding of China's involvement on the African continent.

The introduction does a great job in outlining the major contours of Kenya's and Zambia's postcolonial trajectories as well as China's foreign policy during that time. The first chapter engages with China, Kenya, and Zambia between 1949 (the proclamation of the People's Republic of China) and 1964 (the year of Northern Rhodesia's independence under the name of Zambia). In Chapter 2, Sun examines Kenya's foreign policy and its relations with China from 1964 to 1975. Chapter 3 investigates Zambia's foreign policy and its relations with China between 1965 and 1974. The fourth chapter engages in a synchronous,

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comparative perspective on the political transition and multifaceted engagements between China, Zambia, and Kenya during the late 1970s and 1980s. The fifth and last chapter unearths the importance of the past in the present, looking at China's 'return' to Africa in the period between 1989 and 2019. The comparative perspective is most developed in the last two chapters. One of the book's most valuable contributions is its ability to connect the past to the present and investigate the relations up to 2019.

Concerning the sources utilized by Sun, the author emphasizes that many studies during the late Cold War era suffered from a lack of access to archival documents from both China and many African countries, and therefore often reached "dogmatic and facile conclusions." (p. 10) A new generation of scholars has provided new insights and perspectives, recognizing that both the studies conducted by researchers from the 'East' and those conducted by 'Cold Warriors' based in the West had significant limitations that had shaped earlier 'East'- 'South' studies (Calori et al. 2019; Mark/Kalinovsky/Marung 2020). In order to paint a more nuanced picture, Sun drew on a wide range of archival sources (national, provincial, party, and private), oral history interviews (elite interviews) as well as published memoirs of actors involved in these exchanges. Additionally, a number of intriguing photographs, and newspaper articles from all three countries, are analysed in the book. The source base is further enriched by participant observation and Sun's visits to the various institutions, locations (train stations for example) and objects (statues) that she researched for the study.

The discussion of the various archival institutions, including the Foreign Ministry Archive in China, is informative and useful for researchers in the field. Conceptually and methodologically, the author places her approach within the field of international history, practising multi-local archival research and the use of 'shadow' collections in the National Archives of the United Kingdom (TNA) as well as the US National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). In a notable contribution to the ongoing discourse, Sun presents a set of sources that challenges the notion of "archival pessimism" towards African postcolonial archives, which has been criticised by Nana Osei-Opare (2021). By utilising archival materials from Kenya and Zambia's national archives, Sun demonstrates that both countries possess operational state archives that historians can utilise for their research. However, the author should be more transparent in this regard, as it was not clear to me whether the comparatively good archival situation was *the* determining factor in selecting Kenya and Zambia as case studies. It would be of interest to ascertain the criteria employed and the reasons

why other countries, such as Tanzania or Guinea, just to name two possible options, were not selected as case studies.

With regard to the state of research, the field of relations between African countries and China has been booming for roughly two decades now (Alden/Large/Oliveira 2008; Taylor 2009; Cheru/Obi 2010; Li/Farah 2013; Xu 2018; Shin/Eisenman 2023). Sun emphasizes that “[f]ew topics on China’s remarkable ascension to the status of global superpower have captured the interest and imagination of both popular and academic audiences more than China’s renewed levels of engagement with the African continent.” (p. 1) The African continent has emerged as a significant arena for the analysis and comprehension of China’s expanding influence in the global South. Yet, Sun maintains that many of the studies in the field lack a thorough historicization of China’s relations with African countries during the times of decolonization and the Cold War. Moreover, many studies on China-Africa relations are dominated by “a Eurocentric, mostly white, narrative” (p. 3) while Africanists (with exceptions such as Jamie Monson noted) are faced with the difficulties of the Chinese language when aiming to incorporate Chinese primary sources.

In my view, the great strengths and contributions of the book are indeed both its Africa-centeredness and comparative lens. Being a historian of Africa first and a global historian engaging with the Cold War and decolonization second, I found the book’s deep grounding in African history very appealing. As a central motto, Sun “not only recognises the discomfoting tendency to characterise Africa as a whole but also proposes to historicise the interconnectivity of the domestic and foreign policy of postcolonial African states, as well as that of their Chinese counterpart.” (p. 8) A trained African historian, with a Master’s degree from the African Studies Centre in Oxford, UK, before proceeding with a doctorate at Oxford University (p. ix), Sun is well prepared for this task. She displays a vast knowledge of Africanist classics, visible in the utilization of concepts such as Terence Ranger’s “usable past”, John Lonsdale’s writings on “African agency”, Jean-François Bayart’s concept of “extraversion” and Frederick Cooper’s “gate-keeper state”. The author’s excellent understanding of African history is also visible in the ideological-practical analysis of African socialisms (see also Sun 2019) and foreign policy, as well as the liberation struggles in Southern Africa. This is complemented by incorporating Cold War histories which emphasize the “global Cold War” such as the works of Odd Arne Westad, Piero Gleijeses, and Christine Hatzky.

However, one topic that is lacking in Sun’s analysis is the construction of the Tanzania-Zambia-Railway (TAZARA), arguably one of the most important Chinese infrastructure projects at the time. Given the centrality of TAZARA,

depicted by Sun as *the* Chinese flagship project and as a strategic asset in contemporary China-Africa relations in general (pp. 5, 14), it was surprising that TAZARA – negotiations, the construction period, tensions, face-to-face contacts, modalities of the loan, etc. – did not figure prominently in the book. While I am aware that there are a number of historical accounts of TAZARA, not least from Monson (2008, 2009), I would have appreciated greatly to read Sun's own historical reconstruction of the project and her analysis on how it impacted Sino-Zambian relations. I am convinced that such an analysis would have greatly benefited the book. Moreover, with access to the National Archives in Zambia and the Archive of the United National Independent Party (UNIP), Sun could have drawn on archival documents from two institutions (and thus viewpoints) which do not figure prominently in Monson's research on TAZARA.

A further comment may be permitted on the selection of cases of cooperation and entanglement between China, Zambia and Kenya. The author explains that her coined term "brotherly strangers" (p. 22) captures the paradoxical nature of these encounters. It refers to the ambiguous feelings that guided these encounters and relationships, such as "indifference, ambivalence, and estrangement, as much as by solidarity and friendship." (p. 23) Sun further convincingly argues that "to write the history of Kenya's and Zambia's relations with China is to do more than simply amalgamate their respective nationalist historical trajectories." (p. 23) Yet, when it comes to the selection of case studies for the various chapters, it is not always clear to the reader why they were selected – due to the exciting and intriguing source base (e. g. the diary of the Chinese military adviser), with the aim to also insert aspects of gender history (e. g. the female Chinese dancers and actors), to contribute to important fields of East-South/South-South research (e. g. the Chinese medics in the field of medicine and public health)? In these instances, it would have been beneficial if the author had provided further insight into the rationale behind the selected case studies, as it is likely that there were numerous other potential examples of interactions and cooperation, such as those in the agricultural, transport, or educational sectors.

Moreover, it is also unclear whether many of the economic projects, such as water pumping stations, agricultural mills, and textile factories, existed only on paper or were actually implemented. From the wealth of scholarship on East-South cooperation, especially if one is familiar with the nature of these often over-ambitious plans, coupled with the 'shopping lists' of African governments, we know that while dozens of projects may have been planned at any one time, it is important to follow the archival paper trail over the years to assess which of the promised projects were actually realised.

Economic, political and cultural relations were crucially impacted by the personal interaction of Chinese, Zambian, and Kenyan actors ‘on the ground.’ The study shows how the issue of ‘race’ was in many ways secondary to the anticolonial and anti-imperialist priorities of Communist China’s discourse.” (p. 178) However, Sun posits that the pervasiveness of shared anti-white sentiment among Africans and Chinese was exaggerated by Chinese actors. In fact, the book shows, social interaction between ordinary Africans and Chinese was infrequent and sporadic. There was a clear paradox involved when Chinese workers had to work ‘shoulder to shoulder’ as part of their anti-imperialist alliance with Africans, while at the same time there was a strict separation between ‘work’ and ‘leisure’ in terms of social interactions, camp facilities, etc.

One of the book’s outstanding strengths is its synchronous comparative perspective. As part of the narrative structure, the author succeeds in interweaving similar patterns in two or even three countries such as the particular characteristics of one-party rule. The analysis is also attentive to intra-party rivalries and politicians’ personal contact with their Chinese counterparts, overall providing a rich, complex picture of power and politics in the three countries. A particularly intriguing feature of the comparative lens is to see how differently China’s transformation from socialism to a market economy and ultimately, capitalist superpower, was perceived by Kenyan and Zambian political elites during the late 1970s and 1980s.

The *longue durée* perspective shows how historical narratives and imaginaries – most prominently the TAZARA railway, but also Chinese support for the liberation struggles of various movements – served, and still serve, as a legitimising foundation for China’s extraordinary expansion of both trade with Africa and foreign direct investment in African countries. Importantly, Sun does not eschew highlighting tensions and lines of conflict, such as the disregard of certain labour rights and trade unions by Chinese companies, the lack of indigenous African ownership, and the recurring spectre of debt servicing in the last two decades. In this context, it is also relevant to consider the role of terminology in the debate and the potential for alternative forms of expression. The vocabulary employed in the book encompasses a range of terms, including ‘solidarity,’ ‘aid,’ and ‘foreign investment.’ ‘Infrastructure aid,’ in particular, is a term that may warrant further scrutiny. As the author notes, the Kenyan port of Mombasa could potentially fall under the control of Chinese creditors if the Kenyan government defaults on its loans (p. 174). In such a case, it is evident that the ownership of a strategic port in a foreign country would rather envisage heteronomy than constitute ‘aid.’

Overall, Sun's book delivers on its promise to unearth the "rich history of interactions" between Zambia, Kenya and China without "simplistically branding 'China in Africa' as either neo-colonial or altruistic" (p. 186), but rather shows in detail how it was "driven by complicated and sometimes contradictory historically informed rationales" (p. 186). The study presents a compelling and empirically substantiated account of the manner in which Kenyan and Zambian politicians leveraged their connections with external actors to navigate domestic challenges and political rivalries. The book's depth makes it a major contribution to the internationalisation of African political history. Indeed, through Sun's study historians figure more prominently in the analysis of China-Africa relations in contrast to the dominant international relations approach, which is often reductionist, lacking a deeper understanding of local contexts, and is mostly misguided by a superficial (if any) treatment of the past. This is a great achievement. Taking these factors into account, I am convinced that the book will serve as an inspiration for similar empirical explorations with different African case studies in mind.

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