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The Dragon, the Lion, and the Ballot Box: Evaluating China’s Impact on Democracy in Africa
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Publication Date
2016-04-01

Undergraduate
The Dragon, the Lion, and the Ballot Box: Evaluating China’s Impact on Democracy in Africa

Cameron Silverberg

Political Science Honors Thesis

Thesis Advisors: Professor Amy Gurowitz and Professor Leonardo Arriola

April 14, 2016
Abstract

Over the past two decades, China has forged a prominent economic partnership with practically every country in Sub-Saharan Africa. These partnerships have been met with concerns over the possible effects of Chinese aid and trade on democracy in Africa—concerns that are particularly invoked by China’s cooperation with the continent’s most repressive regimes, such as those in Sudan and Zimbabwe. This point raises a question: What impact is Chinese economic engagement having on the quality of democracy in Sub-Saharan Africa? In this thesis, I argue that concerns over China’s impact on democracy in Africa are unsubstantiated by evidence. Regression analyses reveal that Beijing does not appear to disproportionately finance dictatorial regimes. Instead, as demonstrated by a series of highly statistically significant findings, China aids and trades with the same African nations that receive aid from and trade with Western nations. Additional results show that there is no empirical basis from which to conclude that Chinese economic engagement is harming Africa’s democracies. These results are supplemented by the case studies of Kenya and Uganda, which similarly demonstrate that China is not undermining democracy in Africa. These quantitative and qualitative results contradict the expectations that would be made by drawing from the substantial amount of literature that is pessimistic towards China’s relationship with Africa. In doing so, they cast doubt on fears of a “Beijing Consensus,” in which China’s rise is seen as harmful to democracies across the world, and they suggest room for cooperation between China and the United States in Africa.¹

¹ I am enormously thankful for the help provided to me by many people as I wrote this thesis. Professor Amy Gurowitz and Professor Leonardo Arriola guided me throughout this process and gave me invaluable input on each step of my research. Gabrielle Ehul, the statistics advisor for the Political Science Honors Seminar, and Harrison Dekker of the Berkeley Library Data Lab both gave me incredibly helpful guidance in statistics and quantitative analysis. The Institute of International Studies’ generosity allowed me to travel to Nairobi, Kenya, in January 2016 in order to conduct interviews with experts in academia, journalism, and non-governmental organizations—an opportunity that greatly helped me with the qualitative analysis. My partners in the Honors Seminar over the past year, Dipin Kaur and Grant Richman, have been a source of phenomenal feedback and friendship. And, of course, my family has been a bedrock of support for me throughout my life, my college career, and my experience writing this thesis.
Introduction: China, Africa, and Democracy

While his hometown of Beijing endured a brisk and gloomy day, Chinese President Xi Jinping was on the other side of the planet, basking in the summer sun of Johannesburg, South Africa. It was December 4, 2015, and Xi was surrounded by dozens of leaders who had arrived from across the African continent for the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), a summit that takes place every three years between Chinese and African officials. At the gathering, China committed to providing $60 billion in development assistance to Africa—a commitment that was triple the amount made at the previous FOCAC (Guest 2015). More remarkably, that announcement came in the midst of a significant slowdown in the Chinese economy (“China Pledges $60bn to Develop Africa” 2015).

This announcement was the latest indication of an economic and political partnership between China and Sub-Saharan Africa that has developed rapidly over the past two decades. But this expanding alliance has been cause for controversy, particularly as it regards the effects of Chinese aid and trade on African governments. China’s central foreign policy doctrine is non-interference, which means that it refuses to involve itself in the internal affairs of other countries. As a consequence, some scholars argue, China has helped to sustain some of the most repressive regimes in Africa, such as those in Sudan and Zimbabwe, because it has provided an economic lifeline as Western nations and international institutions have sought to isolate them. In this thesis, I aim to address this concern by asking the question: What impact is Chinese economic engagement having on the quality of democracy in Sub-Saharan Africa?

This question is important to address because of its implications for China, Africa, and the larger international order. For Chinese politics, the question addresses the global impact of
China’s economic ascension since the late 1970s by evaluating its effect on political systems that are thousands of miles away. For African politics, it adds clarity to the broader issue of the role that external actors play in moves toward democracy on the continent. And for international relations, it examines a widespread fear voiced by academics and policymakers alike: that China is exporting a vision of development that highlights state control and authoritarianism. In doing so, this “Beijing Consensus” threatens the model promoted by the United States, the “Washington Consensus,” which prizes democracy as a key component in liberal, market-driven economic growth for the developing world (Shinn and Eisenman 2012, 4-10).

In this thesis, I argue that concerns over China’s impact on democracy in Africa are unsubstantiated. Multiple regression analyses reveal that Beijing does not appear to disproportionately finance dictatorial regimes; instead, it engages with the same African nations that Western nations do. Statistical results also show that there is no significant relationship between Chinese aid or trade and democratic decline on the continent. The case studies of Kenya and Uganda further illustrate that there is little evidence to suggest that China is undermining democracy in Africa. These results contradict the expectations that would be made by drawing from the substantial amount of literature that is pessimistic towards China’s relationship with Africa.

I begin my thesis with a section covering the background behind China-Africa relations. That background sets the stage for the debate over China’s impact on democracy in Africa. In the section that follows, I review the two predominant perspectives that have emerged in the literature in response to this debate, which Seifudein Adem labels as Sino-pessimism and Sino-optimism (2013, 233–246) Drawing from this literature, I list three hypotheses, which serve as
predictions as to what one ought to see reflected in the data if the perspective is accurate. After reviewing the two schools of thought, I conclude that both suffer from a lack of quantitative support, which is all the more essential given the conflicting theoretical nature of these schools of thought. In this sense, the question is similar to the debate on whether foreign aid helps or harms democracy in nations that receive it. Scholars have noted that this longstanding argument hinges largely upon quantitative analysis, because the competing theories offer plausible but contradictory answers (Kersting and Kilby 2013, 125; Askarov and Doucouliagos 2013, 603). Correspondingly, in the debate over China’s impact on African democracy, the two schools of thought are useful insofar as they help to develop hypotheses that can then be tested empirically, which is what I do in the following section.

Because the data ultimately offers no conclusive characterization of China’s economic relationship with Africa on a country-specific level, I turn to case studies of Sino-Kenyan and Sino-Ugandan relations following the empirical section of the thesis. I use these two countries because both began receiving similar amounts of foreign aid in 2000 but then diverged significantly—with Kenya receiving dramatically more aid than Uganda by 2013. These case studies serve as further support for the trend found in the regression analyses: that there is little evidence from which to argue that Chinese economic engagement is harming democracy in Africa.

Finally, I conclude with implications from these findings for American academics and policymakers. The key point that emerges from this thesis is that China-Africa relations should not be met with instinctive anxiety. There appears to be little quantitative or qualitative support for the idea of a “Beijing Consensus” that is spurring dictatorship on the continent. Accordingly,
American leaders should look for common interests with which to cooperate with China in Africa, such as in developing infrastructure and combatting diseases. To forego the opportunity to do so, out of a fear that Beijing is impeding democratic development on the continent, would be to give up on mutually beneficial international collaboration on the basis of a theory that is unsupported by evidence.
Background: China’s Longstanding Relationship with Africa

The differences in opinion over China’s impact on democracy in Africa ultimately concern differing takeaways as to recent developments in Sino-African relations. Yet those developments are predicated on a longer history of interactions between China and Africa. That history is relevant to the subsequent discussion of current China-Africa relations and its political implications because it established the predominant characteristics of the relationship that persist to this day.

Sino-African relations became well-established following the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had triumphed in a civil war over the Chinese Nationalists, who fled to the island of Taiwan. Following this victory, the CCP turned to the next stage of the conflict—achieving diplomatic recognition for the new nation, thereby replacing Taipei with Beijing as the legitimate representative of China in international affairs. Accordingly, the Chinese government sought partners in this pursuit, and it viewed Sub-Saharan Africa as an ideal location from which to recruit them. Large numbers of African nations achieved independence from colonialism in the mid-twentieth century, thereby providing new arenas for Beijing to establish diplomatic relations. Moreover, as decolonization unfolded, countries in Africa came to make a third of the membership of the United Nations (UN), an organization in which Beijing passionately wanted membership (Rich and Recker 2013).

Recognizing the importance of Africa to its global ambitions, China turned to economic inducement. The PRC established a program of foreign aid, which it offered as an incentive for newly-independent African nations to endorse Beijing as the sole, legitimate political authority
over China, as opposed to Taipei. This aid program mirrored the focus of Western nations’ aid programs in the 1950s, in that it concentrated largely on helping other nations to develop the infrastructure needed to expand their economies. The emphasis that China placed on constructing roads and bridges only became distinct in the 1970s, as institutions like the World Bank shifted from financing infrastructure to supporting initiatives such as improving health outcomes and alleviating poverty (Brautigam 2009).

Yet Beijing’s economic diplomacy was different from the West from its inception in a crucial way: it rejected political conditions attached to aid and sanctions placed upon trade, as part of a comprehensive strategy outlined in 1954 by Premier Zhou Enlai. The crux of this strategy, which was known as the “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence,” was that China’s foreign policy would not concern itself with the domestic affairs of other countries—and by extension, other countries ought not intrude upon China’s affairs. Perhaps most importantly, this doctrine meant that any country that established relations with and received aid from the PRC had to recognize Beijing instead of Taipei. To do otherwise would be to intrude upon what the CCP saw as an internal conflict within China. These principles remain the centerpiece of China’s foreign policy in the twenty-first century (Brautigam 2009, 30-31).

The CCP’s economic outreach with Africa spurred notable diplomatic victories. While only five African nations had official relations with Beijing at the end of the 1950s, three decades later that number had grown to 44. Political support from Sub-Saharan Africa ultimately helped Beijing supersede Taipei as the holder of China’s seat at the UN and its role as a permanent member of the Security Council in 1971 (Thomas 2013). As relations continued to develop, Chinese leaders increasingly invoked their belief that China and Africa shared a common enemy
of colonialism and Western dominance of international affairs, and therefore had to help one another in what came to be known as “South-South cooperation.” This partnership was perhaps best demonstrated by the continued aid that Beijing provided African countries, which included the Tanzania-Zambia Railway Authority—a massive infrastructure project, completed in 1975 by Chinese and Tanzanian workers, which continues to symbolize the China-Africa partnership (Power, Mohan, and Tan-Mullins 2012).

Despite these triumphs, however, Sino-African relations cooled during the late 1970s and into the 1980s. Having been devastated by twin disasters, the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, China refocused itself on its own economic development and scaled back on its aid to Africa (Muekalia 2004, 7; Brautigam 2009, 41-42). Following his ascent to power in 1978, Deng Xiaoping pursued a broad-based strategy of economic reform for China. Farmers and entrepreneurs were enabled to sell portions of their goods to make a profit, which planted the seeds of a market economy into the communist country. Deng also established special economic zones (SEZs)—provinces along China’s coasts that aimed to attract investment from other countries. In the years that followed, China’s reforms propelled the country to remarkable levels of economic expansion (Economy and Levi 2014, 20).

China’s economic growth paved the way for a recommitment to its ties with Sub-Saharan Africa. Beginning in the 1990s, the Chinese government sought to substantially increase its economic engagement Africa, in large part due to its search for the natural resources and materials needed to sustain the country’s fast-paced growth. This led to the formation or revitalization of economic partnerships between China and nearly every country in Africa, as aid, investment, and trade proliferated. In a particularly notable development, China became the
largest trading partner of Africa in 2009. All the while, the CCP and African governments grew
closer politically. Beijing established the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000,
in an effort to provide a multilateral platform for diplomatic engagement on a continental basis.
The CCP has also held meetings with political parties and organizations from across Sub-
Saharan Africa (Shinn and Eisenman 2012, 3–5).

This recent phase in Sino-African relations sets the stage for the current debates over
China’s role in Africa. As previously noted, the question of democracy receives particular
attention because of China’s unwillingness to impose political conditions on its aid program and
to continue to trade with dictatorial regimes. In response to this question come two different
perspectives, as outlined by Professor Seifudein Adem of Binghamton University: Sino-
 pessimists and Sino-optimists.
China’s Role in Africa: Sino-Pessimism vs. Sino-Optimism

This section reviews the Sino-pessimist and Sino-optimist perspectives. After reviewing the two schools of thought, I conclude that both suffer from a lack of quantitative support, which is all the more essential given the conflicting theoretical nature of these schools of thought. In this sense, the question that I hope to answer is similar to the debate on whether foreign aid helps or harms democracy in nations that receive it. Scholars have noted that this longstanding argument hinges largely upon quantitative analysis, because the competing theories offer plausible but contradictory answers (Kersting and Kilby 2013, 125; Askarov and Doucouliagos 2013, 603). Correspondingly, in the debate over China’s impact on African democracy, the two schools of thought are useful insofar as they help to develop hypotheses that can then be tested empirically, which is the task I turn to in the next section.

Sino-Pessimism: China as a Disruptor of Democracy in Africa

The Sino-pessimist school of thought is highly conspicuous in the literature on China-Africa relations, and it offers a clear answer to the question at hand: that Chinese economic engagement is exerting a negative effect on democracy in Sub-Saharan Africa. Sino-pessimists argue that China is disproportionately drawn to engagement with African dictators. Beijing finds a significant incentive to engage with autocratic regimes because they tend to have fewer and less comprehensive regulations, which in turn enable China to quickly invest in and begin importing natural resources. Democracies, by contrast, tend to have labor rules that impede upon the ability to make these quick investments (Alden 2007, 66–72).
At the heart of Sino-pessimism is the argument that without China’s financial assistance, many autocrats on the continent would have remained internationally isolated—and perhaps may have been deposed from power in the process. Indeed, some of China’s closest relationships are with nations that cannot or will not meet the conditions that accompany traditional sources of aid, such as the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund (IMF). According to the pessimists, this insulates these regimes from the democratizing conditions that would ordinarily be applied to these states by Western institutions (Shinn and Eisenman 2012, 13–14).

This view of China’s role in maintaining authoritarianism in Sub-Saharan Africa is voiced prominently by Robert Rotberg, who writes in his book, *China Into Africa: Trade, Aid, and Influence*, that China has played an outsized role in sustaining the leadership of autocrats in nations such as Sudan and Zimbabwe with foreign aid. Rotberg notes that Beijing is rational to do so, because protecting authoritarian leaders with foreign aid ensures access to the natural resources that its economy needs. Furthermore, if China were to abandon autocrats under the weight of international scrutiny, the Chinese Communist Party and its authoritarian practices would be eligible for scrutiny under its own logic. Rotberg highlights the role that China played in protecting Robert Mugabe, the president of Zimbabwe, from potentially devastating international isolation, as it provided a range of military and food aid in the wake of controversial elections in 2005 and 2008 (Rotberg 2008, 11–15).

May Tan-Mullins, Giles Mohan, and Marcus Power emphasize the capacity that Chinese economic engagement gives to political elites in Africa to “triangulate” among donor aid. This means that China gives governments in Sub-Saharan Africa the opportunity to turn away from the binding political conditions imposed upon them by traditional Western donors, and then to
later engage with donors and trading partners on much stronger terms. Tan-Mullins, Mohan, and Power point to the example of Angola, which emerged from civil war in 2002. The Angolan government, led by the same political party since the country’s independence, was wary of the binding political conditions that would accompany a significant loan from the IMF, and subsequently left negotiations with the institution in 2003—turning instead to Beijing. China and Angola soon signed a US$ 2 billion aid package, which exchanged Chinese construction of infrastructure for Angolan oil. This set the stage for Angola’s spectacular economic growth in the mid-2000s, and it later enabled the country’s leadership to court a far wider set of investors, such as Brazil and South Africa (Tan-Mullins, Mohan, and Power 2010, 865–876). This point exemplifies the insulation and protection that China can give to autocratic regimes, thus bolstering the argument that its foreign aid undermines democracy in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The Sino-pessimist perspective makes the clearest case for what one ought to expect in the data on China’s effects on democracy in Africa. If the pessimistic argument is empirically correct, then one would presumably find that Chinese economic engagement is significantly and negatively correlated with the quality of democratic governance in African nations. This forms the crux of the first hypothesis.

*Hypothesis #1: Chinese economic engagement is spurring a decline in democracy in Sub-Saharan Africa.*

Ultimately, the specific case studies cited by Sino-pessimists appear to be compelling examples of how China can set democracy back on the subcontinent. But to what extent does this characterize the aggregate effect of Chinese economic engagement with Sub-Saharan Africa? This question appears to be largely bypassed by the Sino-pessimist school, which seems to favor
individual examples of authoritarian rule buttressed by Chinese aid. In doing so, the perspective overlooks the diversity of governance models in Africa, practically all of which trade with and receive aid from China. Indeed, Chinese economic engagement supports longstanding and well-governed democracies such as Botswana and Mauritius, examples that depart quite markedly from those spotlighted by the Sino-pessimist school (Samy 2010, 85).

**Sino-Optimism: Refuting the Skeptics of China’s Role in Africa**

The Sino-optimist school of thought appears to be more sparse as it concerns democratization, but it answers the question by arguing that China’s supposedly negative impact on democracy in Sub-Saharan Africa is greatly overblown. According to the some optimistic narratives, Chinese economic engagement has even helped to facilitate democratic development in Africa in certain cases.

These contentions are most cogently voiced by Deborah Brautigam in her optimistic book, *The Dragon’s Gift: The Real Story of China in Africa*. Brautigam responds to the accusation that China bolsters authoritarianism by posing a counterfactual: In the absence of Chinese economic engagement, would autocrats in nations like Zimbabwe be forced to take on foreign aid that would compel them to move towards democracy? Brautigam proceeds to answer this speculative question by noting that while China does engage with African dictators, a wide number of actors—from European banks to multinational corporations—similarly provide financial resources to autocratic regimes, and had done so prior to China’s rise on the continent. Moreover, empirical evidence suggests that traditional donors that place conditions upon their foreign aid have dispersed billions of dollars of aid to countries like Cameroon and Ethiopia, yet
both have remained some of the most repressive and autocratic regimes on the planet (Brautigam 2009, 284–285).

Brautigam also argues that in some cases, the impact of Chinese economic engagement can ultimately be one that promotes democracy instead of hinders it. While this may seem contrary to China’s goals as an authoritarian state, Brautigam contends that China ultimately values stability over all else in the nations to which it offers aid. In certain situations, China has been an advocate for democratization in an effort to promote greater stability in the nation in question. For example, Brautigam refers to China’s diplomatic efforts to pressure the former president of Sierra Leone to abdicate power after his defeat in the 2007 presidential election (2009, 286).

Akin Iwilade offers an even bolder argument for how China has helped nations democratize through its economic engagement. He contends that in nations transitioning to democracy, such as Ghana, Tanzania, and Zambia, China has often acted as a helpful force for democratization by providing expansive aid in the form of infrastructure projects. Going even further, Iwilade cites the example of Sudan as one that displays China’s increasing susceptibility to international opinion, and its potential to catalyze a process of democratic change. While China’s engagement undoubtedly shielded Sudan’s autocratic regime from the full wrath of international isolation, it also gave the Chinese significant leverage over the Khartoum regime—leverage that heavily mattered in 2004, when Beijing began to shift its policy orientation toward the genocide in Darfur. Chinese diplomatic weight is partially credited for forcing Sudan’s government to negotiate with the Sudanese People’s Liberation Movement, which ultimately yielded South Sudan’s independence (Iwilade 2014, 5–10). Iwilade’s examples fold into the
larger Sino-optimist narrative: that Chinese foreign aid does not necessarily yield a negative impact for democracy in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The Sino-optimist perspective is thus less uniform in its analysis of China-Africa relations. On the farthest end of its analytical spectrum, the Sino-optimist school of thought argues that China can actually spur democracy in Africa in certain contexts. If this version of the Sino-optimist perspective is empirically correct, then one would expect to find that Chinese economic engagement is significantly and positively correlated with democratic quality. This generates the second hypothesis.

_Hypothesis #2: Chinese economic engagement is enabling an increase in democracy in Sub-Saharan Africa._

By contrast, the more mainstream version of the Sino-optimist perspective does not argue that China is catalyzing democracy in Africa. Rather, it simply refutes the prevalent notion that Beijing is systematically undermining democratic governance on the continent. If this argument (which is more limited than that seen in the second hypothesis) is true, then one would expect to find no relationship between Chinese engagement and democracy. This point forms the final hypothesis.

_Hypothesis #3: Chinese economic engagement is yielding a negligible or non-notable effect on democracy in Sub-Saharan Africa._

Upon initial reflection, the Sino-optimist school successfully exposes some flaws in the Sino-pessimist school. Most notably, Brautigam points out how unconvincing it is to assume that, in the absence of Chinese foreign aid, dictators from Angola to Zimbabwe would consequently fall from power, leaving countries on the pathway to democratic development. Yet
the Sino-optimist perspective suffers from a variety of flaws. Similarly to the Sino-pessimist
school, it seems to generalize from a select number of favorable case studies in order to conclude
that China is not impeding democracy on the subcontinent. Moreover, it almost certainly
overreaches in its attempt to reason that China can be beneficial for African democratization. As
Brautigam herself notes, “It would be odd if the Chinese, who do not practice democracy at
home, required it of others” (2009, 286). With that understanding, it is similarly odd how
Brautigam attempts to argue that China's aid can spur democratic transitions by citing one
diplomatic success in Sierra Leone.

**Reviewing the Two Perspectives**

Both schools of thought ultimately suffer from the same flaw: their lack of quantitative
analysis. Because of the lack of data analysis, both theories end up drawing conclusions about a
complex, multinational relationship from individual case studies. Accordingly, my thesis aims to
fill this gap in the literature by conducting a series of regression analyses in order to determine
the overall effect that China is having on the quality of democracy in Africa.
Data Analysis: Empirically Evaluating China’s Impact on African Democracy

In this section, I test the hypotheses drawn from the literature by conducting a series of regression analyses. The results of these regressions ultimately cast significant doubt upon the Sino-pessimist view, in that they do not display a statistically significant relationship between Chinese economic engagement and democracy.

In order to empirically examine the effects of China on Africa’s democracy, I must first define the variables. The two relevant variables that I am reviewing are Chinese economic engagement with Africa and the quality of democracy in African nations. China’s engagement with Africa can be classified into two different categories: aid and trade. Accordingly, I have gathered statistics on these categories of economic engagement with respect to all of the countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, and I use the Polity IV Project to measure the quality of democracy within each country. The universe of cases that I will examine is all 48 Sub-Saharan African nations, and the units of analysis will be these nations in particular years. Using all 48 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa is important because it allows the research to uncover the full extent of China’s impact on African countries along all stages of development and democratization.

To determine the impact that China is having on democracy in Africa, I begin with the question of what is drawing Chinese economic engagement to Africa in the first place. I do so because it could be the case, as Alden (2007, 66–72) argues, that China chooses to provide aid and trade to like-minded autocrats. If that point were true, then the causal chain would be reversed: Chinese aid and trade would not be causing a surge of dictatorships, but dictators would be receiving a surge of Chinese aid and trade.
With this being the empirical starting point, I begin by running a series of regressions that use Chinese aid as the dependent variable. I do so in order to determine if aid in particular is statistically correlated with a decline in democracy, thus indicating that China is seeking to bolster autocrats on the continent. The Chinese government does not publish comprehensive, country-by-country information on its aid program (Shinn and Eisenman 2012). Therefore, I use data gathered from AidData, a research initiative that was created by scholars from Brigham Young University and the College of William and Mary. AidData has compiled a database of Chinese aid projects in Africa beginning in 2000, drawing from a rigorous analysis of press reports that has been corroborated through the consultation of a range of academic work and international agency assessments. While this is an imperfect measure of China’s aid in Africa, it appears to be the best available option in the absence of official records from the Chinese government (Strange et al. 2013).

Utilizing AidData’s classification scheme, I differentiate China’s aid into two different dependent variables: official development assistance-like aid (ODA-like aid) and other official flows-like aid (OOF-like aid). As a team of scholars wrote in a recent AidData Working Paper entitled “Apples and Dragon Fruits: The Determinants of Aid and Other Forms of State Financing from China to Africa,” this two-tiered distinction in China’s aid is enormously important in order to avoid making hasty generalizations about China’s economic engagement abroad. As the paper explains, the traditional donors of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) utilize a standard framework for reporting about their aid to other countries, which differentiates between official development assistance (ODA) and other official flows (OOF). Simply put, ODA refers to the foreign aid in the traditional sense of the
term. It encapsulates financial flows that are given by governmental agencies in one country to another, with the specific purpose being to spur development of some kind in the recipient nation. ODA is set apart by its charitable purpose: it includes loans with generous grants attached to them, debt relief, and scholarships. OOF, by contrast, is far more commercial in nature, and consists of loans without grants attached to them and projects that are meant to further mutual economic interests rather than development in the recipient nation. Because China does not belong to the OECD and does not use its standardized system of reporting on its aid program, AidData classifies China’s aid projects into “ODA-like aid” and “OOF-like aid.” It does so based on criteria such as the developmental purpose (or lack thereof) of the relevant project and the concessional nature of grants attached to these projects. The importance of disaggregating Chinese aid to Africa in this manner is clear: it separates charitable, traditional foreign aid from more commercial projects made to further Chinese economic interests (Dreher et al. 2015).

Accordingly, I divide my data analysis of what drives Chinese foreign aid into ODA-like aid and OOF-like aid. I begin with ODA-like aid as the dependent variable. In the first model I use, I conduct a linear regression with the Polity IV Project Score as the first independent variable and a few notable control variables that Dreher et al. use in their AidData Working Paper, which include the level of corruption, rents from natural resources, and gross domestic product (GDP) per capita.²

² Data on the level of corruption is from the Worldwide Governance Indicators database of the World Bank (accessed January 24, 2016). Data on rents from natural resources and GDP per capita is from the World Development Indicators database of the World Bank (accessed December 4, 2015).
Then, in a second model, I conduct a linear regression with more control variables, most of which are similarly used in the AidData working paper: aid from traditional OECD donors, United Nations voting parity with China, and the level of trade each country has with China. Finally, the third model I use is country fixed effects. This model controls for variables that exist within the 48 nations of Sub-Saharan Africa and remain constant among them, such as each of their own unique demographics, socioeconomic statuses, and economic structures (Bryan and Jenkins 2013, 1–2).

**Empirical Analysis**

The results are shown in Table 1. In the first model, no statistically significant relationship emerges between Chinese ODA-like and the Polity IV Project score or any of the other three control variables. That means that in this model, there is no evidence to suggest Chinese ODA-like aid is disproportionately going to countries based on the quality of their democracy, nor is there evidence to suggest that it is disproportionately going to countries with high levels of corruption, high rents from natural resources, or high GDP per capita. In the second model, there is similarly no statistically significant relationship between Chinese ODA-like aid and democracy. Only one of the control variables emerges with a statistically significant relationship—aid from Western donors, in a highly significant relationship—indicating that

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3 Data on aid from traditional OECD donors, which consists of the cumulative bilateral flows from the Development Assistance Committee, comes from the World Bank’s World Development Indicators database (accessed December 4, 2015). Data on UN voting parity comes from Michael Bailey, Anton Strezhnev, and Erik Voeten (2013). Data on trade with China comes from the United Nations Comtrade Database (accessed on December 4, 2015).
China systematically gives foreign aid to countries that already receive aid from traditional donors, which supports the findings made by Dreher et al. (2015). The final model repeats the overriding trend, with no statistically significant relationship found between democracy and ODA-like aid. Aid from traditional donors once again is highly statistically significant, lending further support to the Dreher et al. (2015) findings.

Table 1: Chinese ODA-like Aid

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<td>Constant</td>
<td>61576.8*</td>
<td>89790.5</td>
<td>296621.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2.34)</td>
<td>(0.61)</td>
<td>(1.40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>320</td>
<td>316</td>
<td>316</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country Fixed Effects?</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: t statistics in parenthesis. * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001. Dependent variable is Chinese ODA-like aid. Forty-eight countries. Years: 1995-2013.
I replicate these three models of regression analysis, with the same control variables, for Chinese OOF-like Aid. The results are shown in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(1)</th>
<th>(2)</th>
<th>(3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Polity IV Project Score</strong></td>
<td>14779.2</td>
<td>8512.3</td>
<td>23338.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.22)</td>
<td>(0.72)</td>
<td>(0.66)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level of Corruption</strong></td>
<td>-246917.7*</td>
<td>-171464.1</td>
<td>45496.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(-2.05)</td>
<td>(-1.47)</td>
<td>(0.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rents from Natural Resources</strong></td>
<td>4686.9</td>
<td>2236.4</td>
<td>609.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.52)</td>
<td>(0.73)</td>
<td>(0.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>GDP Per Capita</strong></td>
<td>-4.524</td>
<td>4.896</td>
<td>16.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(-0.23)</td>
<td>(0.26)</td>
<td>(0.40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Aid from DAC</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.200***</td>
<td>0.232***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(4.21)</td>
<td>(3.61)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>UN Voting Agreement with China</strong></td>
<td>129860.6</td>
<td>1994549.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.19)</td>
<td>(1.56)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level of Trade with China</strong></td>
<td>0.0230</td>
<td>0.0113</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(1.71)</td>
<td>(0.59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Constant</strong></td>
<td>5706.2</td>
<td>-194383.6</td>
<td>-1643523.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
<td>(-0.32)</td>
<td>(-1.43)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>N</strong></td>
<td>185</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From these results come similar analytical implications to those of Chinese ODA-like aid. In all three models, there is no statistically significant association between OOF-like aid and the Polity2 score, which means there is no empirical basis from which to suggest that China is
directing even its commercial aid to autocrats or democrats based on the political system alone. In the first model, there is a minimally significant negative relationship between level of corruption, suggesting that corrupt African nations receive less commercially-based foreign aid from China. Yet this relationship disappears in the regression analysis in model 2, which adds additional control variables. Similarly to ODA-like aid, Model 2 finds a highly significant association between foreign aid from traditional donors and OOF-like aid, which again suggests that China is donating funds to the same countries that receive substantial amounts of development assistance from the West. Model 3 also finds no statistically significant relationships between Chinese OOF-like aid and any of the independent variables, with the exception of aid from traditional donors, which again is highly statistically significant. Taken together, these two tables suggest that Chinese aid is not distributed to African countries based on their governmental systems. There is no evidence from the data that suggests that development or commercial aid is disproportionately going to dictators, which runs contrary to the expectations of the Sino-pessimist school of thought.

Before turning to the democratic implications of this economic engagement, I turn to Sino-African trade. I use the United Nations Comtrade Database for data on trade, which adds together the total exports and imports made between African countries and China.\textsuperscript{4} I utilize the same three regression models, with the same independent variables, that I used to analyze foreign aid in order to examine if trade is disproportionately going to African countries that are

\textsuperscript{4} Data from UN Comtrade Database was accessed on December 4, 2015.
autocratic. The one change I make is to the list of independent variables is to replace foreign aid received from DAC donors with total trade. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Total Trade with China

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(1)</th>
<th>(2)</th>
<th>(3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Polity IV Project Score</td>
<td>111798.3</td>
<td>-36735.2</td>
<td>-41731.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.82)</td>
<td>(-0.94)</td>
<td>(-0.83)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Corruption</td>
<td>-1777166.3**</td>
<td>-844244.6*</td>
<td>-1035667.7*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(-3.03)</td>
<td>(-2.25)</td>
<td>(-2.19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rents from Natural Resources</td>
<td>-8620.6</td>
<td>4541.0</td>
<td>6771.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(-0.49)</td>
<td>(0.39)</td>
<td>(0.51)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP Per Capita</td>
<td>769.0***</td>
<td>57.24</td>
<td>39.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(7.43)</td>
<td>(0.81)</td>
<td>(0.48)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Trade</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.172***</td>
<td>0.192***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(28.13)</td>
<td>(26.70)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN Voting Agreement with China</td>
<td>756264.0</td>
<td>688372.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.45)</td>
<td>(0.41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-767605.2</td>
<td>-1740937.5</td>
<td>-2042174.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(-1.12)</td>
<td>(-1.19)</td>
<td>(-1.37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>629</td>
<td>620</td>
<td>620</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country Fixed Effects?</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: t statistics in parenthesis. * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001. Dependent variable is total trade with China. Years: 1995-2013.

In the first model, there is no statistical significance between trade and the Polity2 score. This indicates that political considerations do not determine which countries trade the most with

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5 I derive the total trade variable adding together data on total exports and total imports, which is from the World Development Indicators database of the World Bank (accessed December 4, 2015).
China. There is a moderately significant negative relationship between the level of corruption and trade, which indicates that as a country becomes more corrupt, it loses trade with China. GDP per capita is also highly significant, which means that Chinese trade tends to be greater in countries with wealthier populations.

In the second model, which introduces more control variables, there is again no statistical significance observed between trade and the Polity2 score. A minimally significant relationship is again found for the level of corruption present in African countries, which further indicates that more corrupt nations trade less with China. Most interestingly, total trade has a highly significant relationship with Chinese trade. This relationship suggests that China does not seek to disproportionately trade with autocrats, but rather maintains a robust trading relationship with nations that already have strong trade links to the West and other countries.

The third model, like the one before it, also does not show a statistically significant relationship between trade and the Polity2 score. Once again, it shows a minimally significant relationship between level of corruption and trade. In addition, it again shows a highly statistically significant relationship between total trade and Chinese trade.

When these three models are viewed collectively, it appears that the variables that make a difference in Sino-African trade are the level of corruption and total trade of the different African countries. Notably, the Polity2 score did not appear to be a statistically significant driver of trade relations between China and Africa. This observation is thus similar to the one derived from empirically examining ODA-like and OOF-like aid: there is little evidence to suggest that the quality of democracy in Africa determines the quality of the engagement each of the countries has with China. These empirical results thus call into question the claim made by Alden (2007).
They also break down one possible side of the causal chain, which says that countries may not be made more autocratic by Chinese engagement but receive more engagement to begin with if they are autocratic.

With this understanding in place, I turn to the other side of the causal chain—and the main question of my thesis—by next conducting a series of regression analyses with the quality of democracy (represented by the Polity2 score) as the dependent variable. In this way, I can uncover the effect of Chinese engagement on democratic governance in Africa.

The Democratic Implications of China-Africa Relations: Reviewing the Empirical Evidence

In this second section of data analysis, I use many of the same variables but reverse their position in the regression analyses. The variables signifying Chinese economic engagement—Chinese ODA-like aid, Chinese OOF-like aid, and Chinese trade—are all set as independent variables, and the Polity2 score is the independent variable. This switch is made in order to determine the specific effect that these categories of engagement may have on democracy, as opposed to the effect that democracy may have on engagement.

As I did in the first three tables, I use three models of regression analysis. The second and third model include additional control variables that were not included in the earlier tables.\(^6\)

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\(^6\) In using these additional control variables, I borrow from the research design done by Simone Dietrich and Joseph Wright in “Foreign Aid and Democratic Development in Africa,” a chapter in a larger volume that examines the effect that Western foreign aid has had on democratization (2013, 69–83).
which include GDP per capita growth, rents from natural resources, and ethnic fractionalization. Similarly to earlier tables, the first model begins with a limited number of independent variables, before expanding to a wider number of control variables. The third model utilizes country fixed effects, which is used in order to control for the country-specific variables that may affect the quality of democracy, such as socioeconomic trends. The results are displayed in Table 4.

The first column does not yield a significant relationship between any of the three independent variables representing Chinese economic engagement and Polity2 scores. In other words, no evidence is found in this first model to support the idea that Chinese aid or trade is fueling a degradation of democracy on the continent. The second column brings about the same results, even with the addition of other control variables. The only independent variables that achieve statistically significant relationships are GDP per capita and GDP per capita growth, which lends support to the contention made by Professor Martin Seymour Lipset, which is that nations with more wealthy populations are less susceptible to demagogues and more likely to demand representative governments (1959, 75–84). Finally, in the third column, once again there is no evidence for the Sino-pessimist position. None of the three types of Chinese economic engagement appear to have a statistically significant bearing on the quality of African democracy in Africa.

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Data on GDP per capita growth and rents from natural resources are taken from the World Banks’ World Development Indicators database (accessed on November 12, 2015). Data on ethnic fractionalization is from James Fearon’s article, “Ethnic and Cultural Diversity by Country” (2003, 217–218).
Empirical Conclusions

Reviewing the four tables, the results are clear: there is no evidence from which to suggest that China is disproportionately providing aid or trade to dictators over democrats, nor is
there evidence to suggest that Chinese economic engagement is undermining the quality of democracy in Africa. The evidence instead points to the conclusion that China is not a fundamentally different actor in Africa from other nations, as noted by scholars like Cheeseman (2015, 137–142). This point is displayed by the highly statistically significant relationship between Chinese aid and foreign aid provided by Western donors, as well as the highly statistically significant relationship seen in Chinese trade and total trade. Together, these relationships indicate that China provides aid to and trades with the same countries, in the same years, as traditional actors in Africa do. Combined with the lack of evidence with which to suggest that any of this aid or trade is subverting democracy, the portrait that comes from these regressions is that fears about China-Africa relations are largely baseless from a political perspective.

Because the regression analyses do not provide statistically significant relationships between Chinese economic engagement and democracy—and thus cannot fully characterize the relationship between the two variables—I turn to case studies in the next section in order to better understand the relationship. Specifically, I examine China’s relations with Kenya and Uganda, in order to uncover the implications—or lack thereof—of the country’s effect on democracy.
Case Studies: Comparing Sino-Kenyan and Sino-Ugandan Relations

In this section, I review the impact that Chinese economic engagement may be having on democracy in Africa by comparing China’s relationship with Kenya and Uganda. I have chosen these two case studies because they match on a variety of control variables: they are both former British colonies, they have comparable rents from natural resources, and they have similar rates of ethnic fractionalization. Crucially, both had similar Polity2 scores in 2000 (Marshall, Gurr, and Jaggers 2014a), and both similarly had both accumulated just over $200 million of ODA-like aid from China in the period from 2000-2002, yet diverged notably in the amount of aid they received—with Kenya receiving more than three times the amount of cumulative aid than Uganda did by 2013 (Strange et al. 2014).

Similarly to the quantitative section of this thesis, I first review what drew China to provide aid to Kenya and Uganda. I pay particular attention to likely explanations for the discrepancy in aid, which relate to Kenya’s greater economic value to the Chinese government. After reviewing the experience of these two nations, primarily over the course of the past two decades, I conclude that the comparison complements and expands upon the conclusions made by the quantitative analysis. Despite much greater levels of foreign aid from China than to Uganda, Kenya made notable improvements in its democracy while its neighbor largely endured democratic stagnation—a conclusion that runs contrary to the narrative made by those who fear China’s corrosive effect on African governance.

8 Data on natural resources comes from the World Bank’s World Development Indicators (accessed December 4, 2015).

Preferential Treatment: Why Kenya Gets More Chinese Development Aid than Uganda

In analyzing the differences between Sino-Kenyan and Sino-Ugandan relations, one question stands out: Why did Kenya receive so much more development aid than Uganda? This question is important to understand from the context of democratization because it helps to uncover the ambitions behind China’s aid program, which scholars like Chris Alden (2007) suggest is focused upon natural resources and maintaining autocracy on the continent. On a surface level, however, the Chinese impetus for providing Kenya more aid over the long-term makes little sense. While both had similar rates of natural resource rents, Uganda actually had more throughout the 2000-2013 timespan (“World Development Indicators | Data” 2015). Furthermore, in 2000, the first year that data on Chinese aid becomes available through the AidData Project, both had similar Polity2 scores—Uganda had -4 and Kenya had -2. Both countries, therefore, received similar amounts of aid at the beginning of the 2000s as they maintained similarly imperfect democracies. Over time, however, Kenya became far more democratic, achieving a 9 on the Polity2 scale in 2013, while Uganda only marginally improved to a -1. Yet democratic Kenya received the explosive increase in Chinese aid, not the more autocratic Uganda, a trend that casts significant doubt on Alden’s argument.

If the quality of their respective democracies fails to explain this divergence, so too does some of the other immediate explanations. One would expect for development aid to go to poorer countries, yet Kenya maintained a sizable economic edge over its neighbor from 2000 to 2013. Kenya’s GDP per capita in 2000 was just over $400 United States dollars (USD), and by 2013 it had grown to more than $1,200. By contrast, Uganda’s GDP per capita was roughly $260 USD in
2000 and was less than $700 USD in 2013. Put simply, Kenya’s population remained far better off financially than their neighbors in Uganda, but Kenya was the one to receive more aid for development from China. In addition, both countries had similar voting records to China in the United Nations General Assembly during this period. Drawing from data compiled and analyzed by Michael Bailey, Anton Strezhnev, and Erik Voeten (2013), Kenya voted similarly to China in 83.9% of UN votes from 1995-2013, while Uganda had the nearly indistinguishable record of 81.6% support. From this comparable voting record, one can conclude that diplomatic interests were likely not the impetus behind Kenya’s relative success in attracting Chinese development aid.

Having ruled out a series of competing explanations for the discrepancy, the difference between Kenya and Uganda in their aid trajectories is likely because of differing perceptions of both countries potential economic benefits to China. As Brautigam notes, China offers development aid in large part because of monetary interests—just as wealthy Western nations like the United States do (2009, 15). Chinese leaders internalized this lesson from their nation’s experience as a recipient of Japan development assistance. In the late 1970s, as Deng Xiaoping was beginning the process of reshaping the Chinese economy, he signed off on several deals with Japan that would exchange China’s natural resources for Japan’s financial support for various infrastructure projects. Over time, the newly-created infrastructure helped to lay the groundwork for the PRC’s rapid economic growth. In this sense, Japan had used its aid program to build a mutually beneficial economic relationship. China has largely replicated this type of relationship with Africa, but it now serves in the role of the donor (Brautigam 2009, 46–54). With this context
in mind, one can see China’s aid program, like the aid program of other countries, as a means of investment in the future of other nations.

There is substantial reason to believe that Chinese leaders see Kenya as a better investment than Uganda. As David Shinn and Joshua Eisenman write, the rapid increase in development aid to Kenya in the early 2000s was largely concentrated in advancing the country’s telecommunications infrastructure and capacity. In turn, the various aid projects that constructed this mobile and technological infrastructure employed various Chinese firms. By contrast, China’s economic relationship with Uganda is far more limited in nature, focusing mostly on resources like copper and agriculture (Shinn and Eisenman 2012, 263–269).

China’s greater level of interest in expanding Kenya’s telecommunication capacity, and the corresponding edge this seems to give Kenya over Uganda in receiving development assistance, is likely due to the difference in both nations’ GDP per capita. Findings from the Pew Research Center in its Spring 2014 Global Values survey indicated that nations with higher levels of GDP per capita also had correspondingly higher levels of internet access for their people. This point was made clear in the data on Kenya and Uganda for that year. Kenya, with its wealthier population, had a far greater number of people connected to the internet (29%) than did Uganda (15%). Kenya also had three times the number of smartphone users, at 15% as compared to 5% (Pew Research Center 2015, 8–14). Thus, the Kenyan population’s ability to afford greater access to telecommunications technology likely made it a more attractive destination to support development of such technology as compared to its less prosperous neighbor.

I found additional evidence to support the notion of Kenya’s economic appeal to China when I traveled to its capital, Nairobi, in January 2016 to conduct fieldwork. According to Luo
Yating, a research analyst at the Sino Africa Centre of Excellence Foundation—a Nairobi-based non-profit organization that works to expand relations between China and Africa—the Kenya Chamber of Commerce and Industry has built a substantial relationship with various Chinese provincial governments over many years. This contact has helped to spread knowledge of business and investment opportunities in Kenya to Chinese businesses (Luo 2016). Dr. X. N. Iraki of the University of Nairobi further noted that the existing infrastructure of different countries in Africa is a significant variable that differentiates the amount of engagement one receives relative to another. African nations that have reliable roads and railways are more conducive to doing business (Iraki 2016).

Accordingly, the most logical explanation for the divergence between aid received by Kenya and Uganda is that China saw greater economic potential in Nairobi. This does not make China a unique or particularly noteworthy actor—as Brautigam points out, Japan did the same in its aid relationship with China, and the US also looks out for its business interests when dispersing aid. Moreover, as noted in the regression analyses in the previous section, China gives aid to the same places that Western nations do. China appears to be pragmatic with its foreign aid program, just like other nations that serve as international donors.

Under the pessimistic notion about China in Africa that is articulated by authors like Alden, one would expect to see Uganda receive a greater amount of aid than Kenya, in order to entrench the Ugandan autocracy. Instead, Kenya saw its development aid from China balloon far past what Uganda received, even as it consistently remained more democratic than its neighbor. This contrast bolsters the quantitative findings made in the previous section, which showed that
there is no empirical basis from which to suggest that the Chinese government prefers to economically engage with dictators on the continent.

Comparing the Political Implications of Chinese Engagement with Kenya and Uganda

Kenya and Uganda had comparable Polity2 scores in 2000, with Kenya at -2 and Uganda at -4. The Polity2 measure is a scale that is administered by the Polity IV Project, and it runs from -10, signaling a deeply repressive autocracy, to +10, signaling a highly open and democratic political system (Marshall, Gurr, and Jaggers 2014b, 16–17). Consequently, both countries began the twenty-first century with mixed regimes, although Uganda was slightly more autocratic than Kenya. By 2013, however, there were notable differences in their political systems: Kenya had made significant democratic progress, reaching a Polity2 score of +9, while Uganda had made a far less noteworthy move to a score of -1.10

Remarkably, this democratic progress occurred even as Kenya received the lion’s share of foreign aid from China, a development that pessimists would warn about for the sake of Kenya’s political openness. Put simply, this trend in the measurements from the Polity IV Project cannot be explained by the predominant notion of China’s harmful impact upon African democracy. In order to understand this relationship more fully, one must examine the history of Kenya and Uganda’s political systems over the past fifteen years, and how China interacted with them. By

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10 This trend is corroborated by Freedom House’s data on democracy. In order to get a scale similar to that of Polity 2, I use Amanda Edgell’s dataset, which takes data from Freedom House’s two measures of democracy, inverts it, and then adds them together. Using this scale, Kenya went from a composite freedom score of 5 to 8, while Uganda went from 5 to 6 (Edgell 2014; Freedom House 2014)—reflecting the same process seen in the Polity IV Project’s data on Kenya and Uganda, just with different numbers.
doing so, I conclude that Chinese aid played little to no role in both countries’ political paths, despite rampant fears to the contrary.

Kenyan Democracy and Robust Chinese Aid

Diplomatic engagement between China and Kenya began in 1964, but the relationship became significant in 1978, following Daniel Arap Moi’s assumption of the Kenyan presidency. From the late 1970s to the early 2000s, Chinese and Kenyan officials frequently traveled to each other’s nations. Leaders on both sides saw economic opportunity in the other, particularly in bilateral trade (Onjala 2008).

This period also saw profound and relatively frequent changes in Kenyan politics. Though Kenya had a government with a wide number of ethnically-based political parties upon its independence in 1963, this system was eventually closed down in 1982 under President Moi, so as to outlaw all other parties but his own, the Kenya African National Union (KANU). In 1991, democratic activists were successful in their calls for the reintroduction of opposition parties, but Moi used campaigns of electoral violence in 1992 and 1997 in order to maintain power. But in 2002, various political parties converged to form the National Alliance Rainbow Coalition (NARC), which successfully ousted KANU from power. NARC’s victory paved the way for multi-party democracy to take root, and the new government formed a variety of institutions to fight against corruption and on behalf of human rights (Kanyinga 2014, 8–9). In an illustration of Kenya’s move toward democracy, the country’s Polity2 score moved from -2 in 2001 to +8 in 2002 (Marshall, Gurr, and Jaggers 2014a).
How did China respond as these political changes took place in Kenya? Pessimists would probably expect development aid to have financed the autocratic President Moi and his allies in KANU. Though it is true that Sino-Kenyan relations improved under Moi, the amount of development aid provided by China during this period was a fraction of what would come after he was deposed from office. From 2002 to 2005, in the wake of the country’s transition to multiparty democracy, Chinese development assistance to Kenya grew exponentially, from less than 1 percent of all aid received to roughly 13 percent (Shinn and Eisenman 2012, 268).

Drawing from these figures, it appears that China was incentivized by Kenya’s political progress to pursue a far greater level of economic engagement. From 2002 to 2007, the new Kenyan government pursued policies that generated rapid economic growth (Kanyinga 2014, 10). According to Dr. Isaac Mbeche (2016), director of the University of Nairobi’s Confucius Institute, this economic growth—in combination with a sense of Kenya’s stable political outlook—helped to encourage Beijing to deepen ties with Nairobi.

Having composed less than one percent of Kenya’s foreign aid at the time, China’s development assistance was almost certainly not to blame for President Moi’s autocratic rule prior to 2002. Similarly, it would be an analytical overextension to suggest that the PRC’s influx of aid catalyzed democratic progress in Kenya. What can be said rather comfortably, however, is that Beijing’s heightened economic engagement with Nairobi did not cause a degeneration in the quality of democracy, nor did it prevent the country’s political progress.
Ugandan Autocracy and Sparse Chinese Aid

Like its relationship with Kenya, China has maintained relations with Uganda for more than fifty years (Ssenyange 2010, 57). And like its neighbor, Uganda endured profound political changes throughout the first part of this relationship. In the twenty-five years that followed its independence in the early 1960s, Uganda shifted between military and civilian governments of varying levels of brutality and instability. China remained diplomatic allies with Uganda throughout the turmoil, but the extent of the partnership was limited. In 1986, Yoweri Museveni led the National Resistance Movement (NRM) in a successful takeover of the government (Kannyo 2013, 110–111).

Museveni has remained in power ever since, and in February 2016 he won another term as president in an election that was widely criticized for being unfree and unfair (Kron 2016). This election result served as more evidence of what was born out in Polity2 data points from the beginning of the twenty-first century: Uganda has lagged behind Kenya in making strides toward democracy. Multi-party politics is largely a front for Museveni to collect foreign aid from Western governments under the guise of being democratic. The organizational freedoms of opposition groups are greatly limited, as is freedom of the press (Gettleman 2016).

Of the possibilities that exist to explain the continuation of Museveni’s rule, the argument that Chinese foreign aid has played a key role is thoroughly unconvincing. As was previously noted, Chinese development assistance to Uganda is relatively small, particularly when compared to that provided to Kenya. With foreign aid from China circumscribed, there is little reason to believe that the quality of democracy in Uganda has been harmed by Chinese economic engagement. As Edward Kannyo writes in “Sino-Ugandan Relations: Themes and Issues,” a
chapter in a larger volume on China-Africa relations, “No evidence was found to suggest that China has tried to influence the domestic politics of Uganda. It can be surmised that if tried, it would fail. The history of Uganda, like other African states, has demonstrated that in the absence of direct control, the country’s political and [economic] destiny will be primarily determined by internal factors” (2013, 124). In other words, Chinese leaders appear to practice what they preach in terms of non-interference in other nations’ domestic affairs. The aid that China has provided does not appear to have made a meaningful difference in Uganda’s governmental path.

Conclusions from the Case Studies

In addition to sharing a number of similarities on important control variables, Kenya and Uganda began the twenty-first century with similar levels of Chinese foreign aid and comparably weak democracies. By 2013, however, Kenya had received more than triple the amount of ODA-like aid from China than Uganda did. Pessimists, which predominate over the literature on Sino-African relations, would reflexively predict that this would spur a degradation in Kenya’s democracy relative to Uganda. And they would be wrong in doing so. Kenya, the recipient of the lion’s share of this anxiety-inducing development assistance, made notable strides in its democratization during this timeframe, while Uganda remained autocratic.

These case studies reaffirm two key takeaways from the regression analyses. First, the Chinese government does not appear to base its aid priorities on political concerns; rather, it seems to approach aid in a manner that seeks a return on investment. Kenya, with a wealthier population and a greater means of purchasing Chinese goods and services, appears to receive more aid than Uganda because of its economic appeal. This is not a novel method in which to
conducted an aid program. As Brautigam (2009) writes, practically all countries that give out foreign aid do so with business interests in mind, and China itself benefitted from this same investment-focused strategy as a recipient of Japanese aid.

Second, Chinese economic engagement does not appear to undermine democracy in Africa. Despite receiving a far greater amount of Chinese foreign aid, Kenya made significant progress towards democracy. And while it received far less aid, Uganda remained politically stagnant. These observations do not suggest that Chinese aid is a catalyst for democracy; that would be an excessively optimistic and unsubstantiated conclusion. They do indicate, however, that fears over China’s corrosive effect on African democracy are overblown and under-supported by evidence.
Conclusion: China’s Role in Africa and its Implications for American Foreign Policy

As China has become a global power over the past two decades, its increasingly robust relationship with Sub-Saharan Africa has provoked significant anxiety among Western pundits and policymakers. This anxiety largely rests upon China’s adherence to a policy of economic non-intervention, which means that it refuses to put political conditions upon its aid program and remains opposed to most forms of trade sanctions. According to a highly conspicuous school of thought in the literature on Sino-African relations, China’s foreign policy strategy enables and encourages dictatorship on the continent.

In this thesis, I have examined that fear by quantitatively and qualitatively evaluating the impact that China is having on the quality of democracy in Sub-Saharan Africa. Both statistical models and case studies reveal that there is no evidence to suggest that China is undermining democratic governance in Africa. Regression analyses show that Beijing does not systematically prefer to provide aid to or trade with dictators; in fact, China tends to economically engage with the same countries that Western nations do. They also indicate that there is no empirical basis from which to conclude that aid or trade from China is harming Africa’s democracies. The case studies of Kenya and Uganda similarly display that greater levels of Chinese economic engagement do not mean political catastrophe for the nations in question. Kenya received roughly triple the amount of foreign aid that Uganda did from 2000 to 2013, yet it still made notable democratic progress.

These findings should be accompanied by appropriate caution. China’s latest phase of economic engagement with Africa is still a relatively new phenomenon, and as such there is less data available than would be ideal. Accordingly, this topic would be ripe for re-analysis in the
coming decades. It is possible that time will prove the pessimists right, and that the same regressions I have run in this thesis will offer support for their perspective when administered with more data.

For now, however, a preeminent view of Sino-African relations—one that warns of China’s role as a degrader of democracy on the continent—lacks empirical and evidentiary support. In turn, this conclusion has significant implications for academics and policymakers alike. It suggests that the notion of a “Beijing Consensus,” in which China seeks to challenge the American-led international order with an alternative, autocratic model of governance, is premature. If such a trend exists, a prospect that Chinese leaders themselves reject (Shinn and Eisenman 2012, 4), then it is not on display in Sub-Saharan Africa.

More importantly, this conclusion has specific relevance for American foreign policy. In many respects, the fear concerning China’s role in Africa is a symptom of a larger concern over the rise of a new actor in global politics. The problem with this larger concern is that it can undermine the ability for the two nations to work together on issues of common interest. For example, in 2015 the United States rejected China’s overture to cooperate on the construction of a large dam in the Democratic Republic of Congo. It did so out of a fear of being associated with China’s infrastructure spending in Africa—even though this joint venture would have helped generate electricity in an underdeveloped part of the continent, an explicit goal of the Obama Administration under its Power Africa campaign. Developing infrastructure is just one of the many issues on which there is a substantial convergence of interests between the United States and China regarding Africa, which also includes combatting viruses like Ebola and helping the continent to achieve greater economic growth (Yun 2015).
Sino-American cooperation in Sub-Saharan Africa could benefit all of the parties involved. That possibility should not be diminished by an unsubstantiated fear that China is undermining democracy in Africa.
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