

China's Role in Africa

Great Decisions 2021

I shall begin with some basic facts and historical background. I want to emphasize the difference between the Chinese and Western traditions with regard to colonialism.

Historical Trade and State Relations between China & Africa



- From Roman times there was trade between China and Africa via third countries, as China & Africa were divided by lots of land and sea.
- So direct trade between China and Africa did not occur until around 1400 AD in early Ming Dynasty, when China was the world's leading naval power.
- China had a very advanced ship building industry by Ming times, centuries ahead of Europe.
- The Ming Emperor Yong Le (r. 1402-1424) sent 6 huge armadas led by Zheng He, his Eunuch Admiral, and they sailed through the oceans and seas from China to expand China's tribute system. African countries were incorporated into China's tribute system.

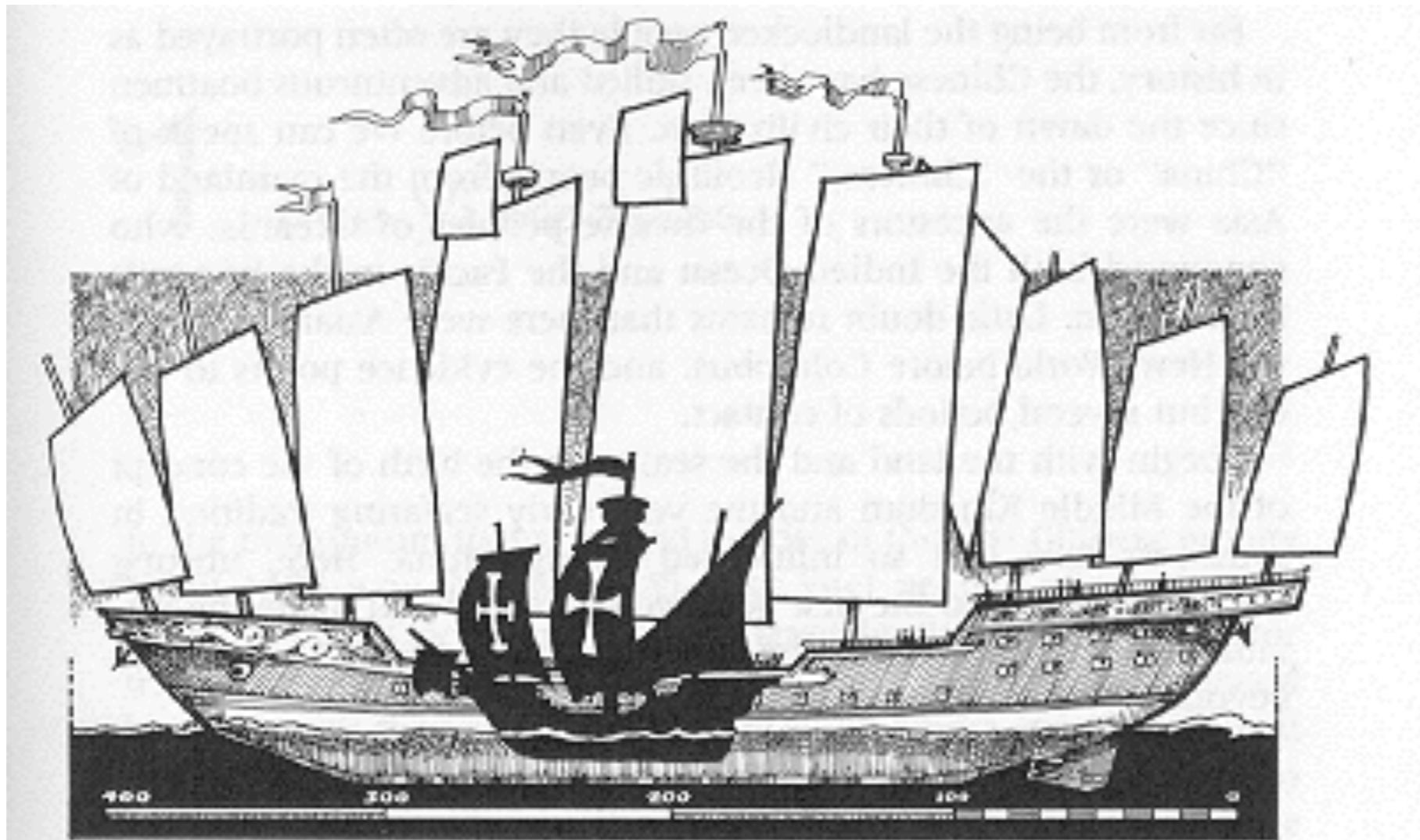
The Tribute System Verses Colonialism

The Chinese “tribute” system, inherited by the Chinese from the past, was very different from European colonialism, we all know what that system involved. China’s tribute-bearing states, weaker states in China’s periphery came to visit the Chinese court once a year, symbolically acknowledging China as its suzerain (overlord), and China would offer them protection and treat them like brother or sister states.

If the Chinese had practiced colonialism, China would have become the great colonial power a hundred years before the age of European expansion. No countries had the ships and guns and cannons that could match the Ming navy.

Now let me show you a picture of the size difference of Zheng He’s treasure ship and Columbus’ Santa Maria, sailing some sixty years later.

Zheng He's Treasure Ship and Columbus' Santa Maria



*Zheng He's treasure ship (four hundred feet) and Columbus's St. Maria (eighty-five feet).
(Illustration by Jan Adkins, 1993.)*

Ming China Abandoned the World's Most Powerful Navy

After the Ming dynasty China reached a high point of international power and influence; it decided, unbelievable for a Western political thinker, to abandon its advanced shipping industry and its powerful navy for internal political reasons. Ming dynasty China then isolated itself from the world.

For several hundred years before the present, direct trade and contact between China and Africa fell into abeyance.

The Rise of the West

Meanwhile, European colonialism engulfed the whole world. European countries fought with each other for dominance. They also led the world in modernization. China stood apart from all of this.

China lost many wars since the 1840s to European countries and also to Japan, which managed to modernize and grow strong. After China became a victim of Western colonial powers and Japan, it fell into a state of disunity.

The defenseless African countries victims of European colonialism for several centuries. From 1881 to 1914 the “Scramble for Africa“ by Western Europeans reduced almost all Africa to colonies of the imperialistic European countries.

The Post-Colonial World

Competition among the imperialistic powers culminated in World War II. After World War II, the leading colonial countries were either defeated or exhausted, and their colonial subjects both in Asia and Africa agitated for independence.

China was united by the Communist Party of China, which won the civil war against the Chinese Nationalists, who retreated to Taiwan.

Within a decade after WW II, most major countries in Asia gained independence. By the end of the 1960s the majority of African countries also became independent.

China offered economic and technical support to African nations and expressed solidarity with them as fellow victims of imperialism. While a very poor country itself, China aided many African countries from the 1950s to 1970s. The primary example was the TAZARA railway, built to help the landlocked Zambia exporting copper and other goods through a Tanzanian port.

China Started to Trade and Invest in Africa in the 1990s

Decades after African independence, many Western businesses, except those in oil, gas, and mining did not try to pursue business in Africa on account of corruption, wars and other perceived risks.

The Chinese dream of China becoming a wealthy and strong country remained elusive until Deng Xiaoping put forward a policy of reform and opening-up in 1978 supported by Western countries. China was happily trading with the West until 1989, when Deng's violent suppression of Chinese students' democracy movement led Western countries to impose sanctions on China. Deng Xiaoping then sponsored a "Go out" policy, calling on Chinese enterprises to look for new markets and resources. Many Chinese businesses turned to Africa in the 1990s. While Westerners saw risk, the Chinese, more willing to take risks, saw opportunities.

The Africans, keen to develop their countries with the help of foreign trade and investments, responded warmly to China's approach, and as a result Sino-African trade grew rapidly. Since 2008, China has become Africa's largest trading partner.

Infrastructure: Africa's Most Pressing Need

European colonial powers left Africa as a poverty stricken continent without infrastructure. Since independence in 1950s and 1960s, infrastructure has remained one of Africa's most pressing needs. The world Bank estimated that it cost less to ship a car from Japan to Kenya than to get it from Kenya to Nigeria. There is currently no major road or railway connecting East & West Africa.

The African Union would like to change this situation without delay. It initiated the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AFCFTA) signed by all African states in 2019. The lack of cross-border infrastructure is a big challenge to the realization of this agreement.

Building infrastructure needs capital. China had the capital and the expertise acquired in building infrastructure all over China in the past 3 decades. China soon emerged as the continent's most important supplier of infrastructure.

Infrastructure Financed by Loans

The infrastructure built by China in Africa are wide ranging. They included railways, ports, bridges, modern road interchanges, power stations (1 in 3 Africans had no electricity), and also universities, schools, hospitals, residential building complexes, government offices, mosques and so on.

The Chinese investment in African infrastructure were mostly financed by low interest loans, a typical example bore interest at 1.5% over 15 to 20 years.

The history of under-development under Western-colonialism is still holding back Africa today. In that context, China is seen as a key alternative. China provides a non-Western development model.

Three decades ago China was also an underdeveloped backwater. China industrialized astonishingly rapidly partly through infrastructure propelled growth. The leaders of Africa would like their continent to develop and modernize quickly like China.

Chinese Built Infrastructures Transformed the African Skyline



This building complex is the headquarters of the African union, a gift from China to Africa.

Africa's Debt to China

The building of a large amount of infrastructure in many African countries financed by Chinese loan means a growing indebtedness of these countries to China. In total, 20% of Africa's debt is owed to China. Economic growth normally enables debtor countries to manage or absorb foreign debts. The Covid-19 undermined the economy of the whole world including that of Africa.

China has received a lot of negative publicity by the US and other Western countries for trapping African countries into debt. These Western countries are exerting pressure on China to forgive African countries' debts as the pandemic brought Africa economic hardship.

China points out that it is not Africa's largest creditor. Nearly 70% of Africa's total debt is owed to Western countries. Africa owes far more debt to the West than to China.

American Response to Chinese Competition in Africa

China and Africa 's Multifaceted relation flourished in the context of a world dominated by America, a country now intensely hostile to China.

The rapid growth of China's trade and investment in African countries, as well as other exchanges between the Chinese and Africans pose a big challenge to the American governing elite, who view China as their country's greatest strategic threat and adversary. They would like to weaken China's influence in Africa.

The US government officials and media have accused China of neocolonialism, lacking transparency in the deals they struck with their African partners, bribing African officials, poaching on African wildlife, and setting debt traps for poor African countries. The local Africans have been told that dealing with China and Chinese enterprises has been bad for them, and they were urged not to do so.

Recommendations to the US Policymakers

The US has been unsuccessful when they asked African countries to sever their relationship with China, or stop doing business with Chinese companies.

The US policymakers should concentrate on rebuilding the US African relationship by focusing on areas where the US has particular advantages. Education is one such area. While China is pouring significant amount of resources into educating African elites, the American university system is unparalleled in strength. Africa has a very young population and education is its most pressing need. The Biden administration should reverse Trump's moves that make it more difficult for African students to study in America. The US universities should reach out to African students and collaborate with African universities to enable the American voice and worldview to gain influence on that continent.

Americans have great strength in the tech sector. It should be fruitful to encourage cooperation between the US and African tech sectors. There are numerous African Startups looking for venture capital and offering chances for joint-ventures. Closer working relationships between Silicon Valley and the African tech sector in countries like Nigeria, South Africa, and Kenya will be beneficial to both sides, while also offering African countries choices beyond China.

American media are enormously popular in Africa, especially African American TV, music and sports. This popularity provides opportunities for Americans to propagate American culture and values on that continent.

