

Marcus Power and Ana Cristina Alves (eds.) (2012), *China and Angola: A Marriage of Convenience?*, Cape Town, Dakar, Nairobi, and Oxford: Pambazuka Press, ISBN 9780857491084, 192 pp.

The volume aims to close some of the gaps in the analysis of China's relationship with Angola. This mutual engagement is growing in importance yet remains underresearched and, as the editors state, is characterised by a distinct lack of transparency.

After an introduction which gives a succinct overview of the questions at stake and introduces the book's structure, Alden's first chapter provides a brief historical synopsis of China's connections with Africa. He correctly points out that China's engagement in Africa, often seen as purely resource-driven, in fact has precedents that go beyond the touted rhetoric of "South-South partnership", and is today "anchored by an expanding cast of characters and changing relationships" (20). A section on the "vibrant and active civil society operating both in the West and in Africa" (22), however, seems to imply that China has "exported" its control over a weak civil society to Africa, when the case of Angola demonstrates that African governments need no inspiration from China to control and limit citizen engagement and have in fact been doing so successfully for decades.

In the second chapter, Malaquias argues that Angola's partnership with China is an "optimal immediate mechanism" (27) to deliver post-conflict reconstruction but that in the long run this partnership is less than ideal, as Angola has "taken the important first steps toward democracy and free markets", and that other partners like South Africa, Brazil and the US might be "more suitable" long-term partners for the political and economic system Angola aspires to build (28). This perspective misjudges the nature of the Angolan regime, which is fundamentally guided by self-preservation and predatory economic interests, and which seeks to emulate the Chinese model of development – rapid economic growth without political liberties. A section on the sustainability of the Chinese-led reconstruction drive, however, rightly identifies the shortcomings of this mutual engagement, especially the lack of qualified personnel in Angola to staff the schools and hospitals being built, and to maintain the buildings and roads.

Corkin's chapter on the Angolan elite's "management of Chinese credit lines" stands out for its empirical richness and general analytical thrust: She spells out the mechanisms for self-enrichment provided by the Chinese credit lines and describes how the Angolan elite are able to manipulate those sources of income. She goes on to correctly identify the "lack of political will" (59) to provide more sustainable solutions for the reconstruction of the country or to increase the level of local participation. Despite a discourse of

national reconstruction and “characteristically vague” (58) pronouncements about the benefits of intensified Chinese engagement for the Angolan population, the provision of goods and services is being outsourced, allowing the elite to maintain their monopoly over every lucrative economic enterprise.

Fernandes, in Chapter 4, cites the paucity of a skilled labour force in Angola as one of the key drivers of the influx of Chinese workers, while highlighting their gradual movement away from large-scale contract work, which negatively affects Angolan entrepreneurs in terms of competition in the private housing construction sector. She also underscores the efficiency and speed of Chinese construction work as central to their business success, a point that Weimer and Vines seem to contradict in their (fifth) chapter, where the quality of Chinese projects, as well as Chinese contractors’ capacity to meet deadlines, is questioned. Weimer and Vines both underscore the need to disaggregate “China” as less homogeneous than it is usually presented and emphasise that it is the Angolan elite who call the shots in negotiating oil concessions. They go on to present some of the investments made by China Sonangol, an opaque, Angolan–Chinese joint venture, in other African countries; these are lesser-known facts that greatly contribute to our understanding of the existing economic entanglements. In Chapter 6, Alves argues that the main driver of Chinese engagement in Angola remains oil. She fleshes out the background of the disagreements between Sonangol and Sinopec that led to the delays in the construction of the Sonaref refinery in Lobito and elaborates how Sonangol has used its preferential rights as leverage against foreign partners.

Croese’s critical analysis of the “modernist model of development” pursued by the government of the People’s Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) as “ad hoc, costly, and centrally planned” (124) is refreshing in its scope and perspective. Croese details how the ruling MPLA’s 2008 electoral promise to construct one million social housing units has been downsized to focus mainly on “state-directed self-construction” (132), with the implementation of even those schemes lagging far behind schedule. Despite a discourse proclaiming transparency and rigour, she concludes, this non-transparent model of development is the fastest and easiest way to meet declared targets that ultimately serve only those already in power.

Quintão and Santos provide some fresh survey data to rectify received ideas on how Chinese companies are perceived in Angola, and they also elaborate on Chinese oil companies acquiring know-how for ultra-deepwater exploration through partnerships with Western companies. Chapter 9, by Liu Haifang, finally brings a Chinese perspective on Angola back into the book as it debunks certain myths about the limited Chinese engagement in Angola prior to 2002. She also highlights the changing dynamics of the rela-

tionship, as well as the risks for Chinese companies operating in Angola, which are often overlooked.

Overall, the book provides much-needed detail on “medium-level” operations and the financial and political implications of Chinese–Angolan engagement. Several chapters also demonstrate the Angolan agency in this dynamic relationship, which is a laudable corrective to the China-centred narrative that still predominates much of the academic literature and media coverage. The analysis could have been pushed further in some of the more descriptive chapters, and arguments like Angola’s “need for rapid reconstruction” after the war are repeated at the beginning of several chapters, which obscures the *political* affinities between Angola and China; here, slightly more stringent editing could have strengthened the overall persuasiveness. Nonetheless, its accessibility and diversity of topics allow the book to address a broad audience of academics and policymakers alike, and its most valuable contributions are the facts it presents which serve to dispel some of the myths around Chinese engagement in Angola. However, as the introduction states, the book also aims to “assist policymakers in Angola [in] understanding the opportunities and challenges of Chinese engagement”. While this objective certainly is salutary, the Angolan experience – and indeed some of the research in this volume – shows that policy decisions in Angola are still often characterised by a certain “immediatism” that prioritises short-term “quick fixes” over evidence-based, long-term planning.

■ Jon Schubert