

The Study of Agency in Africa–China Relations: The Case for Typologies

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In the past two decades, China has emerged as Africa's biggest bilateral trading partner, its top five foreign direct investors, a significant contributor for development finance, and a contractor for infrastructure finance (Oqubay and Lin 2019). The study of how African agents have negotiated with or (re)defined institutions or entities in this relationship and how agents negotiate or utilize existing power structures to maintain or redefine existing settings has witnessed a surge in the past 20 years. The increase in literature on "African agency" offers not only a deeper understanding of the different ways that African actors use their various spaces of engagement to their advantage; it also has allowed researchers to more effectively locate, unpack, and outline such agency (Chipaike and Bischoff 2018; Chipaike and Bischoff 2019; Chipaike and Knowledge 2018; Chiyemura 2020; Corkin 2013; Cheru and Obi 2010; Gadzala 2015; Kragelund and Carmody 2016; Mohan and Lampert 2012; Mann 2023; Odoom 2019; Otele 2016). However, much of this literature categorizes African agency into general categories, such as state, nonstate, elite, and local agency. Although general categories prove useful for an initial understanding, they are limited in explaining the different ways that agency is carried out by different African actors within the state apparatus or among nonstate actors, their modalities, and their impact. Various actors within these large categories of state and nonstate actors exercise agency differently with different motivations, and they use different repertoires of action.

This introductory article suggests a conceptual clarification framework by introducing and describing typologies as a more-constructive classification of African agency. Although it is not a theory or a theoretical structure, I argue that the typology method—a qualitative method derived from sociology—allows for a better classification of different agentic behavior carried out by African actors in their relationship with Chinese (or other) actors. In studying Africa in international politics, scholars across a range of disciplines use agency as a concept to describe ways in which individuals, groups, and factions are interacting with systems of power and exercising influence at different spaces and levels. The definition of "agency" guiding this article is from Obadare and Willems (2014, 1–25), who argued that "agency isn't just a reactive opposition, a mere 're-action' to the actions of other agents. Agency should be understood as a premeditated and targeted

social or political action that takes place in a particular context. It thus involves an intentional action that seeks to resist and impede the constraints of a restrictive environment."

This article answers the following questions: How does the typology method allow for a better and more precise analysis of the study of agency in Africa–China relations by various state and nonstate actors? How does it shed light on the ways by which various agents have negotiated or utilized existing power structures within the Africa–China relationship to maintain or redefine existing settings and hierarchies?

This article answers these questions by using an inductive method derived from the existing literature (i.e., journal articles, working papers, reports, and newspapers) on Africa–China relations as well as an array of empirical examples of engagement by African actors with China. This suggests an actors-based typology of agency displayed by different sets of African state and nonstate actors in their engagement with China at the national level. The article investigates how these actors maneuver among the various spaces, contexts, and repertoires of action that they mobilize. It also demonstrates how the typology method provides a better discernment of the polymorphous nature and intentionality behind different types of agentic behavior and reveals its bidirectionality. That is, agency can be directed toward the self-interest of actors (inward) and also to bettering the conditions of others and other-directed commitments (outward). This critical approach avoids an overromanticization of the study of agency in Africa's politics and international relations (IR).

A typological-method analysis is useful because it provides a more critical analysis beyond large categorizations in which too many attributes can be included (i.e., "sponge types"). This article contributes to a more comprehensive analysis of patterns of African agenc(ies) in Africa–China relations and on agency in IR. The article is organized as follows: the first section introduces the typology method and how it provides a better classification of agency. Five types of agency using an actors-based typology are suggested: (1) presidential agency, (2) executive agency, (3) bureaucratic agency, (4) organized civic agency, and (5) semi- and nonorganized civic agency. The second section applies this actors-based typology method to the context of Africa–China relations.

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CLASSIFYING AGENCY: A TYPOLOGY METHOD

According to McKinney (1966), “The primary function of types and typologies is to identify, simplify, and order data so that they may be described and classified in terms which make them comparable.” Thus, a typology is a methodology that facilitates efficient organization of conceptual and empirical

According to McKinney (1966, 238), constructed typologies are constructed around the following six main variables:

1. *Extracted* (as opposed to ideal): The extracted type, often called the empirical type, is obtained from empirical sources and is based on the “notions of average, common

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processes. However, the leveling of fields also means that the typologies must be considered according to a “best-fit” basis. As McKinney (1966) elaborated, “The better the fit, however, the greater the probability that the typology will be useful in the subsequent analysis. It is thus important to note that the typology method reflects methodological relevance rather than logical purity.” Therefore, the typology method avoids the risk of creating large sponge categories. By being more specific, specific types can be derived from general types by assigning an interpretive context or coherence.

In a context in which China’s impact goes beyond only economic engagement to security and peacekeeping, public health, energy, education, and media relations, among others, systematic typification of how African actors engage and exercise agency with China across spaces and levels becomes necessary. The next section introduces types of agency as a conceptual clarification framework before using the typology in the context of Africa–China relations. Each type is defined with a view toward clearly distinguishing them; subsequent subsections develop the typology in the context of Africa–China relations.

DEFINING THE VARIABLES OF CONSTRUCTIVE TYPES

A popular concern in typifying stems from a reference to specifications on how the types are constructed, leading to what McKinney (1966) described as “ambiguities surrounding the relationship of the types to the phenomena they purport to represent.” The typification that usually is assumed under given conditions is structured by a multitude of types: people, activities, and relationships—what Schutz (1967) termed “first-order constructs.” McKinney referred to them as “existential types.” They are fundamental data and stand in contrast but also in continuity with “constructed types” (McKinney 1966). However, although they are structured around specific variables, the structure and functions of these types are different. When these explicit or implicit variables define the construction of the types, they become their major dimensions. According to McKinney (1966), a constructed type is a “purposive planned selection, abstraction, combination, and (sometimes) accentuation of a set of criteria with empirical referents that serve as a basis for comparison of empirical cases.” The question remains as to how this is accomplished and with which attributes for each type.

and concrete rather than upon those of abstractness” (i.e., ideal types).

2. *Specific* (as opposed to general): By being formulated as specific, for the identified task, it avoids the risk of creating sponge types, in which too many attributes are and can be included. In addition, by being more specific, subtypes can be derived from general types by giving them an interpretive context or coherence within a schema. The identified task determines the degree of generality and specificity in a type’s construction.
3. *Scientific* (as opposed to historical): The scientific dimension of a constructed type implies that researchers use the data to find general and recurrent patterns, whereas the historical method implies that they are in search of the actual sequence of unique events.
4. *Timebound* (as opposed to timeless): Timebound types allow for a better contextualization. According to McKinney (1966), “It is the task of the scientific researcher to remove the time-markings from the phenomena under analysis in order to uncover the general and recurrent.”
5. *Local* (as opposed to universal): The quest for specificity implies that a researcher must situate the type locally to factors such as behavioral attributes relevant to a given set of actors. Because each set of agentic behavior is applicable to a selected set of actors in a specific locale or space and not applicable to all units, it cannot be considered as universal—that is, applicable anywhere in the spatial scope described.
6. *Individualizing* (as opposed to generalizing): Constructed types may be assumed to be either generalizing or individualizing. Individualizing the types derives from researchers being unable to categorize all of the data (risking the creation of existential or sponge types) and the need to construct specific rather than general units for examination.

McKinney (1966) noted that these variables “can be mutually implicated and overlap to a certain extent.” It therefore is important to note that the typology presented in this article reflects methodological relevance rather than “logical purity” (McKinney 1966).

The constructive typology developed in this article is constructed on these criteria and variables based on their empirical

persistence in the literature. The constructive actors-based typology developed is based on five types: (1) presidential agency, (2) executive agency, (3) bureaucratic agency, (4) organized civic agency, and (5) semi- and nonorganized civic agency.

AN ACTORS-BASED TYPOLOGY OF AGENCY IN AFRICA–CHINA RELATIONS

This section describes the characteristics of the five types with more precision and their qualitative differences as they are derived from the literature on agency by African actors when engaging with China.

Presidential Agency

Africa–China relations are defined primarily by government-to-government relations with a strong emphasis on presidential engagement. The president and the executive branch act as the representative authority to create, authorize, and implement domestic and foreign policy priorities. Focusing on the agency of the president sheds light on a specific part of state capacity and agency based on political championship and leadership by highlighting the role of the individual (Wang 2022). By politically championing large infrastructure projects funded and built by the Chinese (e.g., the Standard Gauge Railway [SGR] project in Kenya), some African presidents used their personal rule in project implementation to advance specific interests. Presidential agency is exercised in this way through direct interventions, increased monitoring of the project by bypassing the bureaucracy, co-opting opposition leaders, offering rewards and sanctions to induce greater efforts in agents, and generating a sense of mission (Wang 2022). National and geopolitical interests can have equal influence on presidential agency. The late Tanzanian President John Magufuli intervened directly to suspend the USD \$10 billion Bagamoyo Port project (i.e., reconstruction and mass expansion of the port) because “the conditions set by the Chinese investor were equivalent to selling Tanzania to China.” President Magufuli also removed the no-competition clause for the port project, which allowed other investors—namely, Oman—to compete, and he insisted that the Chinese receive approvals from the Tanzanian government for any operations within the port. As Hodzi (2020) stated, “These direct interventions allowed Magufuli to exercise presidential agency by reasserting his authority and legitimacy in Tanzania in a sovereign way and to dilute what was seen as Chinese dominance in Tanzania.”

In Sierra Leone, President Maada Bio exercised presidential agency for regime survival and legitimacy by canceling a Chinese airport deal worth USD \$300 million. Officially, the decision was made because the existing airport was underutilized, and a new one would not be economical. However, according to Hodzi (2020), “Internal political dynamics were at play as the president campaigned on the need for more transparency in infrastructure deals and was now under pressure to deliver this campaign promise for his regime survival while forcing China to reconsider how it conducts business and engages with Sierra Leone.” Ministers and senior-level

officials (i.e., the executive) also exercise agency to attract the benefits of Chinese relations to their own or their constituencies’ interests.

These examples demonstrate that the exercise of agency is pluri-intentional. President Uhuru Kenyatta (2008–2013) exercised presidential agency through an intentional and purposeful political action in the SGR project, and President Magufuli of Tanzania and President Maada Bio of Sierra Leone used targeted actions to resist or impede constraining pressures.

Executive Agency

High-level political officials (e.g., presidential advisers and cabinet ministers) also hold executive power granted by their positions in government. Ministers, presidential cabinet members, and senior advisers during a timebound period also have a high level of influence in the specific space where they operate. Executive agency is exercised through repertoires of action that combine strategic rhetoric mobilization, indirect interventions, and sanctions. Executive agency by these actors takes place in various settings beyond project sites—for instance, in the way they reconstruct and strategize the “China model” to serve their bilateral relations with China as well as their domestic interests (Hodzi 2020). Although the Chinese growth model appears to provide an alternative to the neoliberal models, there is a lack of clarity on its replicability among scholars and policy makers. However, “despite this ambiguity, African leaders often make reference to a China model that is influencing their development trajectory. They choose elements of the model that represent domestic and international interests for their countries” (Hodzi and Åberg 2020). In countries such as Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, and Tanzania, African leaders use the China model to legitimize policies that guarantee regime survival, including the focus on infrastructure for economic development and dissemination of resources to elites without political conditionalities. As in the case of presidential agency, this exercise of agency is pluri-intentional: Chinese investments provide an alternative to the political conditionalities of Western donors, offer China higher international visibility, and advance the interests of the African elites domestically. Whereas presidential and executive agency provide a good understanding of the types of state agency in Africa–China relations, African bureaucrats as sub-state actors—whose main mission is to execute orders and implement policies—also have a key role in Africa–China relations.

Bureaucratic Agency

Bureaucratic agency is exerted within both large and small African states engaging with China. Under President Yayi Boni’s regime (2006–2016), the government of Benin reinstated China as its strategic partner, leading to a visible increase in the number of Chinese-funded projects, especially in agriculture and infrastructure. President Boni exercised agency through five state visits to China between 2006 and 2014, and he personally received representatives of Chinese state-owned enterprises and pledged infrastructure contracts. However, his exercise of presidential agency drew internal discontent from his administration about what civil servants

considered missteps in the relationship with China. President Boni often was accused of evading tender processes for Chinese contractors and favoring them for their speedy execution, which is crucial in electoral contexts (Soulé 2018). The Beninese ministry of public works contested the lack of a proper tendering process, low wages, and lack of implementation of Beninese national labor and construction norms. According to Soulé (2018) and based on Kaarbo's (1998) elaboration of bureaucratic politics, "Bureaucratic agency revolved around several maneuvers and tactics by using SYNTRA-TTP, a union whose legal status is independent from the ministry, as a platform for their contestation."

Bureaucratic agency also occurs in autocracies. Gadzala (2015) noted that "the government of Ethiopia maintains a strong political influence in the domestic arena through the ruling EPRDF [Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front] council of ministers, an elite group of civil servants in charge of controlling every aspect of foreign or domestic politics." Alemu and Scoones (2013) added that "the EPRDF group also takes a strategic approach focusing on particular sectors and cultivates relationships on multiple levels." Chiyemura (2020) also demonstrated how specific bureaucrats within the Ethiopian government exercised bureaucratic agency and succeeded in brokering and negotiated financing, labor, knowledge, and technology transfer as well as the implementation of wind-energy projects (i.e., Adama I and II) largely to their interests. The contract between HydroChina and Ethiopia showcases a contractor who is largely influenced by Ethiopian negotiators. According to Chiyemura (2020), this took place "first, while negotiating the financing terms and conditions of the Adama wind farms, the Ethiopian government succeeded in negotiating an interest rate for a concessional loan instead of a commercial loan initially suggested by EximBank with a preferred repayment period longer than the market standard (5% to 10%). Ethiopian negotiators also succeeded in decreasing the proposed total investment cost for both projects, and if the Chinese workers violated the rules, permits were not renewed" (Chiyemura 2020).

Bureaucratic agency, like presidential and executive agency, also is pluri-intentional. In the case of Benin, this took the form of countering pressure by the president and/or the executive. Outward intentionality was exercised by the bureaucrats who acted as gatekeepers for the effective implementation of the rule of law to avoid being accused by local populations of mismanagement and incompetence if an accident were to occur from the use of faulty infrastructure. In Ethiopia, outward intentionality in bureaucratic agency was exercised through building favorable clauses for job creation and technology transfer in the contracts.

What the Beninese and Ethiopian examples reveal is that the exercise of bureaucratic agency is polymorphous and largely dependent on how state capacity and internal bureaucratic coordination are organized. It also depends on the nature of the political regime: in Benin, a democratic setting enabled the exercise of bureaucratic agency via informational maneuvers, coalition-building with civil society, and mobilization of

the press—which is less feasible in the autocratic setting of Ethiopia.

Agentic behavior does not necessarily evolve in separate spaces and can result in joint or co-agency (Chipaike and Bischoff 2019). In the case of Benin's Akassato-Bohicon road rehabilitation project, the mutual implication took the form of coalition building set up by bureaucrats through alliances with other unions from other ministries—namely, the ministry of economy and finances, a main player—but also by the interactions between bureaucratic actors and civic agents (i.e., radio show hosts). This demonstrated the relational dimension (Benabdallah 2020) in the exercise of agency whereby different categories of actors coalesce for a similar goal. This proves that bureaucratic and organized civic agency do not necessarily evolve strictly in separate spaces but can be exercised jointly.

Types of Civic Agency

Civic agency in the African context is exercised in both organized and semi-organized/nonorganized ways by various formal and informal actors encompassing a wide range of agency. Civic agency can be divided into several types—that is, organized civic agency by "official" and formal actors such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), trade unions, associations and civic coalitions constituted to balance the power of the state; and semi- or nonorganized civic agency by actors including artists, cartoonists, and other bottom-up resistance movements. These types of civic agency are reflected in Africa-China relations.

Organized Civic Agency

Studies on Africa-China trade relations by nonstate actors (e.g., traders, merchants, and businessmen) often focus on Chinese migrants importing commodities to the continent and becoming competition to local businesses. However, the "parallel infrastructures" of the Africa-China business relationship also merit analysis. According to Mohan and Lampert (2012), "just as many African governments have consciously turned to China as a strategic partner for economic development and regime legitimacy and survival, African citizens have increasingly reached out to China as a source of useful resources for personal and business progression." The dumping of cheap Chinese goods can be attributed more to African traders who scour Chinese markets for goods that are in demand back at home rather than the other way around. In another example, Mohan and Lampert (2012), and also Brautigam (2009), noted that "Ghanaian and Nigerian entrepreneurs, for instance, are playing a much more direct role in encouraging the Chinese presence by sourcing not only consumer goods but also partners, workers, and capital goods from China." Cheap Chinese machinery also supports manufacturing production in Ghana and Nigeria. According to Esteban (2010), "some make recruiting labor from China an explicit strategy in the expansion of their business as they view China as a source of skilled and/or hardworking labor and are actively bringing over Chinese workers in an attempt to increase productivity and provide higher-quality goods and services." African traders and businessmen have exercised

agency by setting up a China Town shopping center in Lagos, which constitutes an attractive entry for Chinese migrants considering Nigeria as a business destination. According to Mohan and Lampert (2012), “the project was brought by a prominent Nigerian businessman who has partnered with Chinese partners with the necessary experience that he recruited. His intention in supporting the China Town project was to attract Chinese entrepreneurs who would go on to establish factories in Lagos, thereby generating local employment and supporting economic development.” Mohan and Lampert (2012) also noted that “these cases show how Chinese enterprises often depend on local patrons in order to survive and prosper.” As stated by Kernen (2014), “they participate in making China an African business.”

Like bureaucratic agency, civic agency also can be pluri-intentional—that is, enabling African business via China but also resisting and challenging the Chinese presence. Whereas several traders have profited from the Chinese presence in Africa, others consider it damaging to their interests. Several Nigerian and Ghanaian traders who called for better regulation of Chinese activities have received state support. According to Mohan and Lampert (2012) and Idun-Arkhurst (2008), “such action has in some cases produced tangible effects, disrupting and/or constraining Chinese enterprise and forcing Chinese actors to adapt their strategies and activities.”

Organized civic agency also is exerted by local NGOs, such as human rights and environmental associations that denounce implications of Chinese investments as a means to making the government accountable on these norms. As Nantulya (2021) wrote, “In Zimbabwe, the government banned coal mining in national parks in September 2020 after three weeks of protests demanding the withdrawal of Chinese mining licenses in Hwange National Park.” The Zimbabwe Environmental Law Association led this campaign and lodged an urgent high court appeal at Harare. Following strategic litigation since 2014 by the Kenya Law Society, in June 2020, a court of appeals ruled that “the new railway from Mombasa to Nairobi which is standard gauge—a flagship project of the Belt and Road—was illegal. Extensive media coverage of widespread corruption in the project also brought influential voices from industry leaders such as the Kenya Chamber of Commerce and Industry, calling for greater scrutiny of the Kenya–China relationship” (Nantulya 2021).

Semi- and Nonorganized Civic Agency

Civic agency also can be semi- and nonorganized—that is, any spontaneous, informal agentic moves by African citizens not already a part of an organized coalition or alliance at the beginning of their action, as in the case of organized civic agency. This agency can take the forms of riots, looting, and verbal contestation by civilians who are not satisfied with the conditions or effects of the Chinese relations. In Ethiopia, land acquisitions for the Adama I and II projects were contested heavily: some farmers agreed to leave their land, others refused and wanted compensation first, and others blocked the access to construction sites and even stole

construction materials. According to Chiyemura (2020), “These forms of everyday resistance show that the farmers did not trust the government on aspects of compensation. The act of resistance by Ethiopian farmers later forced three Ethiopian governments to release the compensation, which resulted in some construction equipment being recovered.” Finally, artists also use everyday modes of resistance as a type of semi-organized civic agency to denounce domination from both China and African governments. African artists and cartoonists have used political satire and comic discourses as a form of resistance, which underscores a new mode of participatory politics. As Obadare and Willems (2014, 1–25) explained, “The use of this specific form of imagery and popular culture, often featured in local newspapers and read by national populations, reflects resistance and dissent to question how the processes implicit in critical engagements and citizenship are engaged and play out.” African artists increasingly depict China as a new hegemon in their satire and cartoons, featuring its rise as an economic superpower, as Africa’s preferred trading partner, and exploitation of the continent’s natural resources by Chinese companies. In April 2017, Ghanaian cartoonist Bright Tetteh Ackwerh published a cartoon titled “*We Dey Beg*” (i.e., “We are begging”) as part of a campaign against illegal mining—commonly known as “*galamsey*”—to which Chinese businessmen are major contributors of cash and equipment. As reported by Asiedu (2017), “The Chinese embassy in Ghana issued a complaint to the Ghanaian government on media coverage and said it was concerned about distorted or biased reports and stories on Chinese people, especially some reports and cartoons that are defaming Chinese leaders and senior officials. The embassy also suggested that bilateral relations between China and Ghana could suffer should the Ghanaian government not take necessary action to stop such things from happening again.” The resisting and threatening tone of the letter denying Ackwerh’s right to expression prompted the artist to “express resistance to resistance” by publishing another cartoon titled “Them Threaten.” This exercise of civic agency shows how popular culture also is recognized as “a sphere that is utilized both to support and perpetuate specific geopolitical visions and to challenge excesses of state power by deploying a critical geopolitical eye” (Hammett 2014).

CONCLUSION

African agency addresses ways in which individuals, groups, and factions are interacting with systems of power, as well as how these relationships have been influenced by diverse historic processes. In a context in which China’s impact and engagement in Africa continues to expand to multiple spheres, typification of how African actors engage and exercise agency with China across spaces and levels becomes necessary. Therefore, using the typology method in the study of agency in Africa–China relations demonstrates that agency is both polymorphous and pluri-intentional, depending on the actors involved and the political, economic, and social context wherein it is exercised. This article has described how African

agency goes beyond resistance and oppositional postures and is exercised by a large array of actors. It has developed a typology of agency by African agents in their relationship with China. However, it is equally relevant to investigate and develop a typology of agency by Chinese agents in their relationship with African actors, their intentionality and repertoires of action, and analyze how these actions enable or disrupt the Africa–China relationship.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

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