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- 65** **Lars Schuler**
China in Ethiopia: The Long-term Perspective

Lars Schuler*

China in Ethiopia: The Long-term Perspective

by Aaron Tesfaye. 2020. New York: State University of New York Press. ISBN 9781438478340.
Paperback. 191 pp. \$31.95.

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The China-Africa relations are at present a growing research area, though tackling it with a mid-level analysis is rare. Professor Tesfaye approaches this topic, analysing the specific case of Ethiopia, with well-deserved aplomb. Looking into the long-term, he questions both Chinese aims and the agency of Ethiopia, a necessary and informative approach that concretely sets the tone for a discussion.

While China is undoubtedly the major partner in any of the African projects, the book does not neglect the African desire. Professor Tesfaye focuses the discussion on a few vital areas that are explored in depth. The dynamics of the Ethiopia-China relations sits at the centre of the book. By following an intuitive layout, an understanding is created that allows for a positive engagement with the ideas presented in later chapters. It is then understandable that the book does not engage in the contentious debate about political models for Africa, but rather relies on the realities prevailing in Ethiopia when discussing the topic.

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The book is divided into five chapters, an enlightening introduction and a powerful conclusion. To that end, the first chapter of the book takes the reader through a faithful account of the past Sino-Ethiopian relations. It traces the historical records from the earliest encounters to the present status quo. Going from the phases of pro-US to pro-USSR inclination, this relationship had been long fraught with both obstacles and risks. On the Chinese side, a habit of prioritising ideology led to a period of heightened tensions, while they also supported the Ethiopian and minority forces in their quests for power or recognition. This period ended in 1991, when Ethiopia strategically partnered with China, which is described in chapter two. This partnership came as a response to domestic and international challenges. China was seen as a partner with the technological knowledge to help modernise Ethiopia. To that end, chapter three discusses the bilateral relations within an economic framework. This framework, the Growth and Transformation Plans (GTPs), allowed Ethiopia to finance investment projects such as dams and roads with Chinese aid. Cooperation led to an increase in trade, while Chinese and Ethiopian entrepreneurs travelled between the two countries for economic benefit.

Chapter four discusses the strategic partnership between the countries. China's three wishes are outlined as follows: secure extraction of minerals needed for industrialisation; find allies in international organisations to assist in its aspirations to gain power; and finally propagate Chinese ideas and culture. Ethiopia for its part receives attractive foreign investments and a major partner, namely China in a theoretically reciprocal manner.

Chapter five investigates long-term aims of both parties. China and Ethiopia both benefit from the Belt and Road Initiative. Chinese interests in Djibouti and Ethiopia are thereby secured and - upon their modernisation - can cover some of the costs of the project. Ethiopia in turn becomes the recipient of regional integration that ideally stabilises the neighbourhood to their liking, and Djibouti becomes an important partner. Ethiopia's unique federal experiment will be tested as these efforts could drive regions apart or bring them closer together.

It is only natural that the book as such would seek to answer more than one question. To that end it posits three major questions with ancillary ones for support. These are all answered competently at the end of the book and are brought to a satisfying conclusion. The first question is about the interests of China in the region. It especially focuses on the potential hierarchy of these interests and identification of the reasons thereof. The second question deals with the different objectives China

has, specifically when looking at the short or the long term. Finally, the third question discusses the challenges China might face. This means it looks at local and international rivalries in the region, potential partners for China and the ways in which they might overcome them.

To this end Professor Tesfaye focuses on the types of relationships that Africa cultivates towards the West and China, dividing them into North-South and South-South relations respectively. He also places a focus on the African desire for a truly genuine partner in their development. This complements the Chinese entry into the peacekeeping space as it takes on a responsible role on security issues and seek to stabilise this vital region. Professor Tesfaye is an expert in the field of Sino-African relations. With multiple publications in this realm, he can truly be considered an authority. His experience gives him a wealth of first-hand information and expertise that can be brought to bear in the process of writing a work such as this. Educationally, he is Chair of the Department of Political Science at William Paterson University and teaches there as well. His two awards of Fulbright Scholarship at two Ethiopian Universities show that his academic expertise is recognised on the continent. He is without a doubt a leading expert when discussing China and the Horn of Africa and their relations within the neighbourhood. Showing his expertise, Professor Tesfaye built an intuitive book that can be easily read and understood. To that end, he laid out the research methodology clearly early on. The book relies on three years of field studies as well as many primary sources. These sources range from ministerial archives and interviews to data from various project analysts and officials. He searched other references from secondary sources at the William Paterson University and a miscellany of archives.

One of the main focuses of the book is the South-South nature of the relations between China and different African countries. While it is maintained that there is a diversity of approaches that China uses in the pursuit of African partners, the reciprocity of this dynamic welcomes interrogation. That is achieved throughout the book by Professor Tesfaye and he reaches the conclusion that, simply due to economic heft, China is the senior partner and main beneficiary of this relationship. This does not mean that there is not any measure of reciprocity, but rather to an advantage for China.

When discussing Africa, the ever-present question of developmental aid is present here, too. An important distinction is made between traditional and Chinese packages. In fact, it is clearly shown how the stricter nature of traditional aid makes the Chinese policy of non-interference in domestic politics a tantalising opportunity for countries that seek to forge their own path not linked

to Western-type democracy. This Chinese policy then allows for a discussion of the home region effect as analysed in the book, concluding that these rent-seeking behaviours make the less structured Chinese developmental aid more attractive. This is a much discussed phenomenon that is handled deftly by Professor Tesfaye.

In fact, it is a very important area to be aware of when studying the Ethiopia-China relations as Ethiopia is likely the largest recipient of Chinese aid. Professor Tesfaye admits that this assertion is difficult to prove conclusively due to the secretive nature of the operation of banks and institutions. Still, he proves very competently that this is most likely the case by discussing the areas of interest for China in the region and why Ethiopia makes an excellent partner.

One of these reasons is the political position of Ethiopia. Generally stable, it is home to the African Union and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, being also of geostrategic importance by acting as an anchor in a tumultuous region. This position allows China to have greater influence in the region, especially with its interests in Djibouti. Another reason is economic, which is also one of the long-term aims that China pursues. At this point, Ethiopia is largely agrarian. China hopes to promote industrialisation by building infrastructure and promoting factories. This drive to industrialisation can be seen as a desire for Ethiopia to play for China the same role as China played for the global economy.

The dependency theory is also briefly but poignantly discussed. It is Professor Tesfaye's opinion that to impose this idea on Africa would do a disservice to the dynamics that are present there. He calls upon Dr. Rohit Negi in his dissemination of the idea. The latter believes that it is premature to apply this aged theory to Africa while developments and their results are not yet certain.

The greatest strength of the books lies in its being a comprehensive work that positions the reader well to expand their inquiries. It achieves this both by employing the expertise of a talented author as well as by making prudent use of its primary sources in conjunction with literature at large. It does date itself somewhat with the memories of a Trump presidency at the effects of his policy. This is, however, an effective warning of the risks African nations take when Western powers can present such diverse leadership in a short timeframe.

The information presented in the book is clear and well laid-out. With tables that are easy to read and understand the points made are all the more strengthened. Professor Tesfaye has produced an informative work that allows for a clear dive into the depths of the topic while being a good primer for those first starting out reading about Africa in general and the Sino-Ethiopian relations specifically. With a clear baseline and the historical content, it becomes a pleasure to engage in the ever more complex but no less clear topics as they are presented. While the Sino-African relations are studied with some frequency, the book goes well beyond the basics and addresses the mid-level gaps in literature that are rarely filled. This provides the author with greater freedom in presenting his findings. Aiding this is the clarity of the text and tone. In short, it is a thorough analysis of the Chinese interests in Ethiopia that does not discount the latter's agency. Still, it leaves enough space for additional research to benefit from.

For both the lay reader and the more well-read scholar this book is a comprehensive starting point. It is in itself a valuable academic text, which is well worth its price. The information contained therein will undoubtedly spark the interest of many readers in pursuing further research into this area of inquiry.