The ‘state’ of postcolonial development: China–Rwanda ‘dependency’ in perspective

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ABSTRACT
This paper aims to investigate the impact of China's aid, trade and investments on the development trajectories in postcolonial Africa, focused on Rwanda. The analytical framework of this study is informed by Helen Milner's observation that 'International political economy is a growth industry'. Furthermore, the study deploys dependency theory and world systems theory to examine how the global economic configuration operates through the hierarchy of core, semi-periphery and periphery among the states. Our focus on Rwanda is based on our observation that this small, landlocked, natural resources-deficient, aid-dependent country is an atypical destination for Chinese patronage and investments. We argue that as a non-resource rich country, Rwanda presents an anomaly, thus, underlining the gap in the existing knowledge on China–Africa engagements. We discuss the inherent dependency in the neoliberal economic structure and present a case for using dependency theory to understand and explain the contemporary globalised economy and emerging South–South cooperation. We conclude with a call for more in-depth cross-comparative research on China–Africa relations to grasp the magnitude of dependencies and economic transformations within postcolonial African states.

Introduction

The historical baggage of colonialism continues to be the dominant theme in discussions about Africa's contemporary challenges. Most of these debates invoke legacies of extractive colonial policies meant to relegate Africa to an inferior position vis-à-vis the European colonial states. The 'White Man's Burden' could only be carried through the unremitting exploitation of the natural and human resources of the colonised. Postcolonial Africa has experienced high incidences of 'civil wars' and 'political instability'; however, not all of them can be directly attributed to the legacy of colonial policies of arbitrary ethnic and territorial divisions. A number of these political upheavals and civil unrests emerge from the lack of effective tools and resources for comprehensive economic development. This situation is exacerbated by the dearth of robust institutional and infrastructural capacities in Africa; indeed, several
of these structural deficiencies are inherited from colonial rule (Platteau 1996; Sachs et al. 2004).

The anti-colonial political assertion in the post-WWII period altered the development discourse, assuming ‘that it was possible for the countries of the South to “develop” themselves, as opposed to “being developed” by the North’ (Wallerstein 2005, 1264). In order to facilitate this development agenda, the states of the North, including the Soviet Union, offered material aid and expert advice to the states in the South. To revamp the governance system and to revive indigenous capacity building, most of the African states availed themselves of some kind of foreign aid and assistance, primarily from the US and former European colonial powers. These economic assistance packages did not emerge from philanthropic motives; instead, they were closely aligned to the interests of donor countries, for gaining diplomatic support, deepening political influence and creating trade and investment opportunities (Riddell 2007; Lancaster 2006; Hulme 2016; Hagmann and Reyntjens 2016). Consequently, such foreign assistance rendered a number of African states passive recipients of the aid instead of fostering an autonomous and self-reliant polity, which could have ushered in robust governance and better institutional and infrastructural capacities (Bauer 1976; Bräutigam and Knack 2004; Levy and Kpundeh 2014; Moyo 2016). Gradually, even emerging economies have surfaced as key players in the foreign aid and investments in Africa. In the era of neoliberalism, emerging economies such as China, India and Brazil are inspired by economic motives rather than ideological or philosophical bonhomie.

This paper aims to investigate the impact of China’s aid, trade and investments on the development trajectories in postcolonial Africa, focussing on Rwanda.¹ The analytical framework of this study is informed by Helen Milner’s observation that ‘International political economy is a growth industry’ (Milner 1998, 112). Furthermore, the study deploys dependency theory (Amin 1972) and world systems theory (Wallerstein 1974), to examine how the global economic configuration operates though the hierarchy of core, semi-periphery, and periphery among the states. Our focus on Rwanda is based on our observation that this small, landlocked, natural resources-deficient, aid-dependent country is an atypical destination for Chinese patronage and investments. Moreover, despite its aid dependence, Rwanda has emerged as a strong state at both domestic and international levels. Unable to cover all sectors of the economy, we keep the focus on China–Rwanda bilateral trade and infrastructural development. The impact of Chinese investments in agriculture, manufacturing and services sectors is not central to our analysis.

The study draws on academic and policy literature, official government documents, and local and international media to gather information about the emerging trends in China–Rwanda relations. The quantitative data for this study was collected from established sources, including the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the United Nations (UN) Comtrade Database, the African Development Bank, etc. In addition to these sources, the economic and statistical data is also sourced from the Chinese Ministry of Commerce (2019, MOFCOM), Government of Rwanda publications, the Rwanda Development Board (RDB), the association of emerging economies of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) publications, and publicly available data from private business entities. The study also includes data from some reliable policy and academic research institutions, such as the China–Africa Research Initiative at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS-CARI) and the European Commission.
The article is organised into four sections. The first section explores Africa’s postcolonial burden and the influence of emerging economies or ‘semi-peripheries’ (Worth 2009, 15). The second section discusses the differences and convergences in the various articulations of dependency theory. The third section engages with the peculiar case of Rwanda and the exceptionalism of the China–Rwanda relations. The final section analyses Chinese economic policies of trade and aid to Rwanda and the dependencies involved. We conclude with a call for more in-depth cross-comparative research on China–Africa relations to grasp the magnitude of dependencies and economic transformations within postcolonial African states.

### Africa’s postcolonial burden and emerging economies

The Cold War drew the newly independent African states into unnecessary armed confrontations, coups and diplomatic machinations well before they could find their feet. Moreover, to keep feeding their insatiable hunger for African natural resources, the states of the North ensured that only corrupt and oppressive African regimes were tolerated. Thus, while the corrupt and authoritative African ‘leaders hanged themselves and their fellow citizens, the rich countries often provided the rope’ (Sachs et al. 2004, 136). Chinua Achebe critiqued the lack of initiatives from African leaders as ‘cargo cult mentality’, and lamented this illusion of a people waiting to be rescued. ‘A fairy ship will dock in their harbour laden with every goody they have always dreamed of possessing’ (1983, 29). The lack of adequate opportunities for human development in Africa, led Achebe to make such a harsh assessment of the African regimes.

International donor agencies and rich countries advanced numerous financial assistance packages including aid, loans and grants to African states. However, despite multiple innovations and iterations to the configuration of international financial assistance, most of the sub-Saharan African states were overwhelmed by these debts. The conditionalities and constraints imposed by the donor communities underline the chimera of political autonomy and sovereignty of the recipient states, a phenomenon explained by Tim Di Muzio as ‘Debt as Power’ (Di Muzio and Robbins 2016). At one point in the 2000s, the sub-Saharan African states were running debt levels of about 100% of their gross domestic product (GDP), and in several cases the annual expenditure on debt servicing was greater than their entire foreign aid packages (Coulibaly, Gandhi, and Senbet 2019; Desruelle, Razafimahefa, and Sancak 2019).

The beginning of the twenty-first century witnessed some of the erstwhile developing nations emerge as the new growth engines of world market economy. In order to maintain the economic growth rate, these emerging economies were looking for sources of raw materials and avenues for market expansion and new investments. Africa, with its vast reserves of natural resources and large market size, soon figured as the most coveted prize for the emerging economies (Balasubramanyam 2015; Alden and Large 2018). Countries such as Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa formed alternative groupings like BRICS and financial institutions such as the New Development Bank (Moyo 2016, 60). China, with its rapidly growing international profile and rising national capabilities, is predictably considered the leader of this new group. For the African states, which had felt marginalised during the period of Western dominance given their colonial histories, and which were constantly struggling to achieve adequate growth and development, these new alternatives appeared quite promising (Moyo 2016, 59).
China was one of the first among the emerging economies to institutionalise its relationship with Africa, through the setting up of a high-level organisation in 2000 called the Forum on Africa–China Cooperation (FOCAC) (Zeleza 2014; Friedrichs 2019).

Unarguably, China – the second biggest world economy – is perceived as the potential challenger to the existing hegemonic world order, and has attracted the highest amount of fascination and scrutiny among all the emerging aspirants (Grimm 2014; Mlambo, Kushamba, and Simawu 2016; Tarrósy and Vörös 2019). Clearly, ‘China’s engagement with Africa has become an emotional subject, it has generated both negative and positive discourse’ (Conteh-Morgan 2015, 31). Although an in-depth analysis of different discourses on Chinese expansion within Africa is beyond the purview of this paper, one may identify some common themes in these discussions. There are two distinct approaches to explain the unprecedent rise in growth in China–Africa relations: Western hegemonic powers are suspicious of Chinese intentions and accuse China of imperialist design and mercantilism, while Beijing insists that its relationship is based on non-intervention and is intended to create mutual benefits (Zeleza 2014, 147).

China’s unprecedented economic growth, coupled with its exceptional achievements at poverty reduction and human development, has also inspired African states to consider the Chinese model as an exemplar (Moyo 2016; Agbebi and Virtanen 2017; Alden and Large 2018; Grimm and Hackenesch 2019). China’s participation and support in anti-imperialist and anti-colonial struggles of the African nations creates greater affinity for it. Despite attaining impressive progress, China continues to claim itself as a developing nation and thus, frames its relations with African states as South–South cooperation. The popularity of South–South cooperation comes from its criticism of the imposition of Western ideas of development and conditionalities on developing countries (Amanor 2013). At the core of this idea is the sharing or cloning of the Chinese model of development, which claims that ‘China did not follow instructions from Western donors. It managed to take control of the policymaking process while receiving supplementary aid and loans from outside sources’ (Xiaoyang 2019, 292). The Chinese approach to development was based on preserving policy autonomy and national sovereignty while utilising all the available foreign aid. In its engagements with Africa, China claims that as a developing nation it is not only familiar with but proficient at resolving developmental challenges.

China’s ongoing economic integration with the African states, regardless of their domestic regimes and policies, has empowered these countries with ‘new autonomy to resist political demands from the US and other Western powers’ (Camba and Hung 2018, 303). Ironically, some of the Western critics assert that the structure and pattern of Sino–African trade today replicate the pattern of trade between countries in Africa and the European colonisers’ (Conteh-Morgan 2015, 31). In the context of Africa’s colonial history and a saga of continuous plunder and exploitation by the European powers, any major economic activity by foreign powers in Africa is always suspected to be an economic invasion or another instance of colonisation. Therefore, a significant part of the criticism focusses on specific themes, such as Chinese apathy towards oppressive rule in certain states, its acquisition of precious natural resources, flooding local markets with Chinese manufactured goods, or employing Chinese labour and expertise instead of creating local jobs (Moyo 2016; Alden and Large 2018). In some instances, the economic engagement in Africa by China and other emerging economies is construed as part of the ‘broader process of primitive accumulation on a world scale in the context of a deepening crisis of capitalism’ (Moyo 2016, 59). In this sense, not just
China but rather the whole of the BRICS is supposed to be reinforcing neoliberalism, and as ‘sub-imperial’ forces, are rushing to join ‘the scramble for African resources, only as a tributary component of Euro-American hegemony’ (Moyo 2016, 59).

To investigate this view of China as one of the sub-imperial powers in Africa, or one of the rising semi-peripheral countries, this paper engages with some of the precepts of dependency and world systems theory (Worth 2009; Agbebi and Virtanen 2017; Mlambo 2019; Tarrósy and Vörös 2019). The classical version of dependency theory posits that the global capitalist system is composed of metropolises (developed nations) at the core while the satellites (developing nations) are at the periphery of the system. The states at the core claim the economic surplus generated by those at the periphery and, thus, this interaction perpetuates the development of the metropolis, while leading to the simultaneous underdevelopment of the satellite states (Frank 1966, 28; Amin 1972, 1974). Immanuel Wallerstein expanded the constituents of world capitalist system and defined a hierarchy of core, semi-peripheral and peripheral areas (1974). The semi-peripheral countries are those either climbing to join or descending from the elite club of core countries (Wallerstein 1974; Terlouw 1992).

Undoubtedly, dependency theory has faced severe criticism for its inadequacies to account for the rise of East Asian capitalist states, globalisation and the rise of China. However, it can be argued that the all-pervasive reach of globalisation (the global capitalist system) is achieved through neoliberalism. Indeed, the global financial regulatory regimes, including all the Bretton Woods institutions, have mandated the developing nations to submit to the global capitalist system, have usurped all the domestic, national financial autonomy of individual nation-states, and have created an enduring dependency that changes form but not content.

One ‘dependency’: many versions

In the post-World War II period, modernisation theory prevailed as the guiding philosophy in Europe and North America, to bring universal development all over the globe. This theory regarded the concept of modernity as both an ideal and an evolutionary process (Rostow 1959). It posited that there was only one path to development and the rich nations were its trailblazers; consequently, the less developed countries were obliged to follow that path under the tutelage of the superior nations (Ferraro 2008; O’Brien and Williams 2020). Most strikingly, modernisation theory claimed that underdevelopment was self-inflicted, that poor countries owed their backwardness to their internal deficiencies: ‘traditional culture, overpopulation, little investment, lack of achievement motivation’ (So 2010, 316).

The challenge to Eurocentric modernisation theory emerged from the Third World countries; the critique was proposed by Raúl Prebisch, then the Director of the UN Economic Commission for Latin America (Ferraro 2008). Prebisch argued that ‘economic activity in the advanced countries does not benefit the poorer countries but often resulted in serious economic challenges in poorer countries’ (Agbebi and Virtanen 2017, 429). He explained that poor countries exported primary commodities at much cheaper prices than what they paid for importing manufactured products out of those very commodities from the rich countries (Prebisch 1968). Therefore, in this structure of global inequality, the poorer countries were caught in an unending spiral of economic losses, and were therefore perpetually dependent on the richer countries.
This structuralist school of thought on dependency was popularly identified as ‘dependencia’, owing to the geographical focus of its scholars and its analysis.

Another prominent proponent of dependency was Mahbub ul Haq, who likened the dividing line between the rich and poor nations to a ‘poverty curtain’. Haq claimed the poverty curtain had divided one world ‘materially and philosophically into two different worlds, two separate planets, two unequal humanities, one embarrassingly rich and the other desperately poor’ (Haq 1976, 3). Admittedly, both Prebisch and Haq traced the roots of inequality between developed and underdeveloped countries to their historical past. However, while Haq highlighted the impact of colonialism on the Third World countries, Prebisch attributed these inequalities to the processes of Western industrialisation (Lubieniecka 2014; Agbebi and Virtanen 2017, 429).

Another prominent challenge to modernisation theory was launched in the late 1960s by André Gunder Frank, who claimed that ‘contemporary underdevelopment is in large part the historical product of past and continuing economic and other relations between the satellite underdeveloped and the now developed metropolitan countries’ (Frank 1966, 28). He described the world capitalist system in terms of an international division of labour, which allows the dominant states (the core) to absorb the surplus capital from the dependent states (the peripheries) (Frank 1966; Agbebi and Virtanen 2017, 433). Theotonio Dos Santos identified dependency as ‘a situation in which the economy of certain countries is conditioned by the development and expansion of another economy to which the former is subjected’ (Dos Santos 1970, 231). He distinguished three types of dependencies, namely colonial dependency, financial-industry dependency and technological-industrial dependency (Dos Santos 1970, 232).

Immanuel Wallerstein (1974) imagined the capitalist world economy as the ‘modern world system’ and traced its advent to the long sixteenth century (1450–1640 CE). He deployed the principles of dependency theory and the idea of an international division of labour to divide this world capitalist system into three categories, namely the core, periphery and semi-periphery (1974; Arrighi 1990). At the core are the developed and powerful centres of the system, characterised by high wages, capital intensity and high skill levels, and therefore producing manufactured goods. The peripheries are the regions that are pushed into subordinate positions through colonialism or other such means of exploitation, and consequently end up as producers of raw materials, with low capital intensity and low skill levels. The semi-periphery is intermediate between the core and periphery in terms of products, skills and wage levels (Wallerstein 1974, 2004; Arrighi 1990). The semi-periphery can be imagined both as a core state falling from glory, like Spain, or a peripheral state moving up the ladder, like Japan.

The theory posits that the generation and appropriation of surpluses is the inherent nature of this system (Wallerstein 1974, 1988; Arrighi 1994, 2007). Wallerstein’s formulation of the semi-periphery is of real significance for understanding how the capitalist system perpetuates (Wallerstein 1974; Arrighi 1990). It represents the fluidity of the system, reflects the potential rewards and risk for the actors in the system and, most importantly, it acts as a safety valve for the system. Semi-peripheries could ‘deflect the anger and revolutionary activity of peripheries, and they serve as good places for capitalist investment when well-organised labour forces in core economies cause wages to rise too fast’ (Chirot and Hall 1982, 85). The semi-periphery stands between the core and the periphery and could be equated to the middle class between the capitalists and the workers (Wallerstein 1974, 349; Robinson
This understanding helps us grasp the role of China in the contemporary global political economy.

Wallerstein does not consider the world system static, and the rise of East Asian economies like Singapore, Korea and Taiwan can be explained through the opportunities afforded for upward mobility within the system (Wallerstein 2005; Arrighi 2007). In addition to the core–semi-periphery–periphery hierarchy, Wallerstein suggests a hierarchical arrangement among core states around a ‘hegemon’. One can imagine changes in the world system triggered through contests among core states for hegemonic status; however, any such changes would be intra-system rather than systemic transformations (Wallerstein 2005; Arrighi 1994, 2002). The rise of China has been construed as the end of Eurocentric hegemony in the world system, especially by Arrighi in his book *Adam Smith in Beijing* (2007). However, despite his sanguinity, even Arrighi is unsure about the extent of changes to the system, since ‘the social outcome of China’s titanic modernisation effort remains indeterminate’ (Arrighi 2009, 87).

To summarise the above discussion, the three schools of thought on dependency, despite certain differences, share the same philosophical convergence in their study of the global capitalist system and its inequalities, which forms the conceptual core of our arguments about dependency in this paper. At the most fundamental level, all three schools consider capitalism a global phenomenon holding disproportionate control over the global structure and the national economic system of each individual country. From this perspective, imperialism, colonialism and globalisation are not just the different historical stages of the world capitalist system but are the processes that sustain the dominance of certain rich nations over the vast majority of other nations. Dependency is, then, co-constitutive to this capitalist system, a historical process associated with the internationalisation of capitalism. The most significant point of concurrence among the three schools is the clear distinction between two sets of states in the international system, characterised ‘as dominant/dependent, center/periphery or metropolitan/satellite’ (Ferraro 2008, 59).

The different schools provide a theoretical framework to examine the complex and dynamic nature of dependency in the context of contemporary changes to the global situation, one of which is the rise of China and its interactions with other international actors, including African states. The idea of three regions, as proposed in the world systems theory – core, semi-periphery and periphery – is quite appropriate to our study of China–Africa relations. The current global order still operates on an ‘international division of labour characterised by the concentration of finance, technology, research and development in traditional core countries and low-wage assembly (along with raw materials) in traditional peripheral countries’ (Robinson 2015, 10). Moreover, Robinson highlights that in the current era of globalisation and the global division of labour, ‘core and peripheral productive activities are dispersed as much within as among countries’ (Robinson 2015, 10).

China, as such, is not considered one of the core states in the global capitalist system; rather, even with its economic growth, it may be considered part of the ‘semi-periphery’ (Wallerstein 2004; Tausch 2010). However, it can also be argued that while China may be considered peripheral to the core Western states, it has emerged as core to all the developing nations, including in Africa. Indeed, neither dependency theory nor world systems theory envisioned the prospect of semi-peripheries imposing themselves on the core or recalibrating the relationship between semi-peripheries and the peripheries (Lubieniecka 2014). We deploy dependency theory and world systems theory to analyse how semi-peripheries sustain and subvert dependency through neoliberal institutions such as BRICS.
or through the narrative of ‘South–South relationship’. BRICS, or the group of emerging national economies of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, together represent 42% of the world population, and represent over 50% of the global economy (Larionova 2020; World Bank Development Indicators 2019). China, the richest in this group, is a prominent global player with a different monetary system in its business dealings with the peripheries, including Africa. BRICS are middle powers, and their economies fit well into Wallerstein’s (1974) formulation of semi-peripheries in world systems theory. We now turn to the case study of Rwanda to understand the complex nature of dependency in its relations with China.

The curious case of Rwanda

In the broad analysis of China–Africa relations, the discourses about economic aspects tend to overshadow the other avenues of interactions between the two sides. China’s voracious appetite for natural resources and its quest for new markets are the two most cited reasons for its deepening engagements within Africa. This narrative assumes an African state must possess large volumes of natural resources, vast tracts of arable lands, significant population and strategically significant geography. Admittedly, Rwanda would feature very low among the aspirants seeking Chinese patronage based on these criteria. This landlocked country has a relatively small population of around 12.5 million in about 26,000 km² of area, owns no significant volume of mineral or petroleum resources, has ‘an exceptionally unfavourable person-land ratio and it continues to be extremely poor in per capita income and human-development terms’ (Kelsall 2013, 120). After a long history of colonial rule, in 1994 Rwanda witnessed one of the most widely reported genocides in contemporary history. However, in the post-genocide era Rwanda has shown extraordinary tenacity and has registered remarkable improvements in all the socio-economic development parameters (Tarrósy and Vörös 2019, 41).

Since the advent of Paul Kagame’s regime beginning in early 2000, Rwanda has enjoyed relatively much higher levels of domestic and international stability. There have been some instances of discord with its neighbours, most notably with the Democratic Republic of Congo over access to mineral resources; however, they have not turned into serious security crises. The government of Rwanda initiated some hard yet far-reaching steps to reform the governance system to create ‘a comparatively strong state; the state administration functions effectively throughout the country and the government has created a strong presence throughout the country down to the village level’ (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2016, 6). The overall corruption level in Rwanda is considered low, and in terms of ‘government effectiveness as well as control of corruption, they have improved since the mid-2000s and Rwanda is among the best performing countries across Africa in these areas’ (Grimm and Hackenesch 2019, 166).

Rwanda, with a dearth of natural resources and a small domestic market, is quite dependent on international aid and foreign investments to manage its economy. China has emerged as one of the important donors cum source of foreign direct investment (FDI) into Rwanda since 2006 (Booth and Golooba-Mutebi 2012; Grimm and Hackenesch 2019). Rwanda shares a number of characteristics in terms of its political and economic systems with China; it is virtually a single-party democracy, led by a strong man – Paul Kagame – who, as president, has scrapped the term limits on his tenure (Carter 2016). Rwanda has embraced central economic planning and has adopted developmental patrimonialism as the ruling
ideology. Under this ideology the ruling elite acquires a complete monopoly on ‘managing economic rents in a centralised way with a view to enhance their own and others’ income in the long run rather than to maximise them in the short run’ (Booth and Golooba-Mutebi 2012, 381). The operative part of this ideology requires a quid-pro-quo agreement between the Rwandan government elites and the people, whereby the elites ‘are gambling on the “expensive” option of building support on a broad base by demonstrating an ability to provide more and better public goods’ (Booth and Golooba-Mutebi 2012, 391).

Rwanda presents itself as an attractive destination for foreign investments; it has political stability, government transparency along with ‘a high quality and cost-effective labour force, a customs union with EAC [East Africa Community] countries, a developed infrastructure, an institutionalised economy and a competitive tax system, all of which characterise the country’ (D’Amour and Wu 2017, 70). Rwanda is considered the second most business-friendly country, after Mauritius, in sub-Saharan Africa (The World Bank 2019a, 5; IMF 2019a, 49). Importantly, ‘companies headquartered in Rwanda that invest at least $10 million are exempt from corporate income tax’ and, quite remarkably, ‘it takes less than 24 hours on average to set up a company’ (Kuo 2016; The World Bank 2019a, 2019b, 2019c). In 2009, the country established a new institution called the Rwanda Development Board (RDB), to facilitate new investments in the country and to provide a one-stop shop for all administrative and regulatory requirements (D’Amour and Wu 2017). Rwanda is very close to vital markets in East and Southern Africa, with prospective access to ‘a market potential of 162 million consumers in the East Africa Community’ (Tarrósy and Vörös 2019, 43).

Rwanda remains an aid-dependent country, though Kagame is trying to wean the economy away from this overreliance on foreign aid, as explained in the policy white paper Rwanda Vision 2020 (2000; Campioni and Noack 2012, 3). The emphasis is on the expansion of the domestic economy through manufacturing, information and communications technology (ICT), and tourism. Rwanda aims to become the technological hub of the region, or the ‘Singapore of the Great Lakes’ (Nanda 2012, 149). Rwanda’s other aspiration is to become a distribution and logistics hub for the East Africa region and to become a land-linked country rather than a landlocked country (Sodipo and Musiitwa 2012, 121). Different studies on Rwanda’s short-term economic outlook (2017–2025) have expressed concerns about the rising debt component of its national economy. These studies project Rwanda’s debt-to-GDP ratio to hover around 53–55% while the foreign aid (grants and loans) to account for 20–22% of the gross national income (IMF 2019a, 2019b; The World Bank 2019a, 2019b; The African Development Bank 2019). In the last few years, Rwanda has witnessed a rise in foreign debt with a corresponding decline in external grant financing as the country approaches lower middle-income status (The World Bank 2019a, 2019b, 2019c). This change in the nature of foreign financial support would cause a spike in Rwanda’s debt burden and, consequently, the extra expenditure on debt servicing may impact its initiative to move away from foreign aid dependence.

Like other potential investors, China too looks for a destination with security, political stability, governance transparency and a business friendly environment to invest and expand its economic activities (Campioni and Noack 2012; D’Amour and Wu 2017; Eom 2018). In this bilateral relationship, Rwanda is clearly not the dominant partner based on existing and potential material sources; beyond the rhetoric of ‘south–south cooperation’ Rwanda must find avenues to keep China interested. Notably, Rwanda is probably one of the few countries in the world that not only procured Chinese weaponry, but has also received military training
for its army units by the Chinese (Zhen 2018). The training has been so thorough that on the 25th anniversary of Rwanda’s Liberation Day, some army units marched in the parade following instructions issued in Mandarin (Zheng 2019).

Though China is not the major donor to Rwanda, it provides Rwanda with an alternative to withstand the pressures and conditionalities of the traditional (Western) donors. Moreover, unlike the other major donors, China prefers to construct physical infrastructure instead of fund transfers. Therefore, it is quite easy to come across China’s visible footprints in the form of the newly built Prime Minister’s office, special economic zone in Kigali, new stadiums, roads, textile manufacturing, education, mobile telephony and even in assisting with the modernisation of the agriculture sector (Kuo 2016; Eom 2018; Lawther 2017). Among the African states, ‘Rwanda combines a strong statehood and stable regime with strong agency in its international relations’ (Grimm and Hackenesch 2019, 165). This implies that despite the precarity of its aid dependency, Rwanda is able to preserve policy autonomy from donors and adopt strong contrarian positions from their erstwhile donors (Whitfield and Fraser 2008; Grimm 2013). We analyse the contours of China–Rwanda economic relations in the next section.

**China–Rwanda economic relations in the dependency matrix**

As discussed in the previous sections, alongside the United States of America and the European states, China has emerged as an alternative source of finance, bilateral trade, expertise and technology for the African countries. Consequently, the volume of trade between China and Africa has grown drastically. According to China’s Ministry of Commerce, in 2018, the total trade volume between China and Africa grew to $204.19 billion. In 2019 EU-27 accounted for 31% of exports and 29% of imports. China accounted for 11% of exports and 16% of imports, while the United States had a 5% share of exports and a 6% share of imports (Eurostat 2020). The EU-27–Africa bilateral trade of goods was placed at $288 billion in 2017 and $314 billion in 2018; accordingly, the trade surplus for the EU-27 was $25 billion in 2017 and $8.7 billion in 2018 (Eurostat 2020). On the other hand, SAIS-CARI placed US–Africa trade at a much lower volume: $65 billion in 2017 and $71 billion in 2018. Under these calculations, Africa’s trade surplus amounted to $13 billion in 2017 and $11 billion in 2018 (CARI 2020).

The above statistical figures may not reveal the exact nature of the relationship between each African state and their trade partners such as the EU-27, China and the United States. However, they do highlight the scope and nature of trade imbalances: while the EU-27 continues to be the largest trade partner, China’s trade imbalance with Africa is proportionately the highest concerning their trade volume. This is a useful background against which to analyse the China–Rwanda economic relationship in greater detail and to assess whether this bilateral relationship may be categorised as mutually beneficial, enabling, exploitative or dependent.

In the post-genocide period, Rwanda has shown remarkable economic progress, registering an annual GDP growth of 7.9% between 1999 and 2016 (Rispoli, McGrenra, and Mbago-Bhunu 2019). However, despite this impressive growth, there are structural issues with the Rwandan economy. Rwanda depends on a subsistence economy, and the export of tea, coffee and minerals such as tin, cassiterite and wolframite. Agriculture is the biggest sector of the economy, employing around 80% of the population, generating 70% of the export revenue
and 32.7% of the country's GDP (World Bank Development Indicators 2019). As an estimate, while 96% of the rural population relies on agriculture for their livelihood, approximately half of Rwandan agricultural households experience food insecurity (Rashidghalam 2017, 105).

To address low productivity and chronic food shortage in the agriculture sector, the Rwandan government has placed a particular emphasis on improving agricultural productivity. A government campaign launched in the early 2000s upgraded farm inputs, reformed specific farming techniques, and introduced new technology and expertise. Indeed, these efforts led to extraordinary growth in the farm sector. However, the potential for growth in the farm sector has peaked; the rise in the rural population is creating severe pressure on scarce land, leading to overgrazing, soil erosion and fertility losses (World Bank Development Indicators 2019; Rispoli, McGrenra, and Mbago-Bhunu 2019). China has invested in new farming technologies and also acquired farmland to engage in Rwandan agriculture, but they remain marginal players in this sector (Lawther 2017; Moyo 2016).

Beyond agriculture, Rwanda’s economic structure is dominated by the service sector, which contributes around 43.9% of GDP, while the industry sector amounts to another 18.7% (NISR 2020). In terms of employment generation, agriculture continues to absorb the highest number of people; it may well be that it is the only available option for the vast rural population. The figures from the 2016–2019 period reveal that services created only 25% of new jobs, while the industry sector added only 18% of new jobs (The World Bank 2019c, 11).

Rwanda also suffers from a massive trade imbalance; in 2018, its total exports amounted to $1.12 billion, while the import bills were $2.03 billion, leading to a trade deficit of $907 million (IMF 2019a). In 2019, the trade deficit grew more than expected, reaching $1.54 billion (News Ghana 2020). One of the most significant contributors to Rwanda’s economy is official development assistance (ODA). On average, ODA adds about 17.2% of Rwanda’s annual GDP annually, ‘higher than the other Sub-Saharan African states and nearly double the average for low-income countries’ (The World Bank 2019c, 5). Several studies have pointed out that Rwanda’s reliance on ODA has declined over the years. However, this remains the biggest single contributor to the central government expenditure; in 2019, ODA provided 62% of such expenditure (The World Bank 2019a). The Rwandan government has launched a massive campaign to reduce the trade imbalance and dependence on foreign aid, develop an indigenous industrial and manufacturing base and expand its service sector, primarily through logistics, telecommunication and ICT services.

In the post-genocide period, Rwanda has assiduously endeavoured to escape the poverty trap and emerge as a developmental state, much like Singapore and other East Asian states. To this end, Rwanda has tried to attract all potential international investors, beyond the traditional patrons such as the United States and the European states to emerging economies like China, India, Brazil and Turkey, among others. Rwanda launched ambitious plans like ‘Rwanda Vision 2020’ and then ‘Vision 2050’ (The World Bank 2019a, 2019c). Rwanda’s ambitions are defined in terms of an income growth model, and the country aspires to reach upper middle-income status by 2035 and high-income status by 2050 (IMF 2019a; The World Bank 2019a). In order to reach these developmental goals, Rwanda needs to grow (per capita) at 10% per annum instead of the current rate of 4% (The World Bank 2019c).

In the contemporary globalised world, Rwanda cannot emulate the East Asian model of manufacturing of high-quality and high-tech products, as the level of competition and the scale of economies both have undergone drastic changes. Despite the impressive gains, Rwanda cannot rely on services alone, since the services sector is unable to provide adequate
employment for the massive pool of unskilled labour (IMF 2019a). Rwanda would be obliged to follow a multisectoral approach, whereby all three sectors of its economy – agriculture, services and industry – are brought into congruence and made complementary to each other. To achieve the desired growth, Rwanda would seek help from anywhere, especially without going through extra scrutiny and conditionalities attached to the economic package. China has been and continues to appear to be the best bet in this regard, emerging as a credible challenger to the traditional donors and trade partners.

Bilateral trade between Rwanda and China has been growing at a faster rate in comparison to other states in the East African region. In 2014, an estimate valued the China–Rwanda bilateral trade at $367 million, in which Rwanda's export totalled $62 million, resulting in a trade deficit of $302 million (Ntambara and 2015). The UN Comtrade Database has data until 2016, and according to their statistics, Rwanda has been running a massive trade deficit with China for several years. We take a three-year snapshot of the available figures; in 2014 the imports from China amounted to $365.5 million, while exports were valued at little over $8 million. In 2015 the Chinese imports were placed at $358.5 million while the exports amounted to $13.4 million. Surprisingly, the 2017 figures showed imports of $378 million while the exports amount to $4 million (UN Comtrade 2020). Rwanda thus incurs a considerable trade deficit to China: $357.5 million in 2014, $345.1 million in 2015 and $373 million in 2016 (UN Comtrade 2020). In comparison, Rwanda also incurs a trade deficit with its other major trade partner, the European Union. Rwanda ran a deficit to the tune of $131 million in 2014, $135 million in 2015, $408 million in 2016 (European Commission 2019). However, beyond the unusual rise in 2016, the EU–Rwanda trade deficit was $154 million in 2017, $156 million in 2018 and $168.5 million in 2019 (European Commission 2019).

Remarkably, the proportion of the trade deficit in China–Rwanda bilateral trade relative to the total trade volume is exceptionally high in favour of China. These trade imbalances directly relate to the structure of this bilateral trade which is heavily skewed in favour of China. Rwanda exports mainly raw materials such as tea, coffee, agricultural products, minerals, hides and skins, some handicrafts, and minerals (Byumvuhore 2019). The imports from China include mainly finished products, capital goods, machinery and electricals, consumer goods and accessories in vehicles and the transport industry. Clearly, in this relationship, Rwanda is the supplier of natural resources and raw materials, while China is supplying finished goods and consumer products.

Apart from bilateral trade in goods and services, China is a vital source of investments and one of the key development partners for Rwanda in the construction of infrastructure. As a land-locked country, Rwanda has always aspired to gain better connectivity with the continent and mostly with the East African region. China has emerged as a significant partner to Rwanda, and between 2002–2018, the two countries launched 61 investment projects and joint ventures worth $419.5 million (The Hope Magazine 2018). Moreover, their investments in tourism, mining and construction sectors were estimated at $352.5 million (The Hope Magazine 2018). In order to seek closer integration, Rwanda formally joined China’s Belt and Road Initiative in 2018 and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank in 2019 (Paduiano 2019).

Chinese financial assistance, grants, aid or other forms of FDI adopt a different approach and pursue different outcomes than other aid donors/assistance providers to Rwanda. China has tied its financial investments to the construction of visible and durable infrastructure,
in the form of roads, bridges, office building complexes, hotels, multi-thousand-capacity stadiums, residential housing complexes and hospitals. The Chinese focus is not on building infrastructure alone, but also on building prominent and iconic structures that deliver a message. China spent $27 million to construct the Prime Minister’s office complex in Kigali, described by the Prime Minister, Édouard Ngirente, as yet another indicator of the growing relationship between China and Rwanda’ (quoted in both Paduano 2019 and Tasamba 2019). Another prominently visible project is the construction of the ‘Vision City’, 4500 residences in a housing complex in Kigali, branded as Rwanda’s largest real-estate development to date (Qing and Xuan 2017).

Chinese investments in road construction are massive; various accounts claim that China has constructed around 70% of the roads in Rwanda (Nanda 2012, 150; Paduano 2019). In the absence of railways and navigable rivers, roads are the most important means of transport and modes of connectivity in and around Rwanda. In the various news items and announcements of loans and grants from China to Rwanda, road construction is a regular feature of this relationship. The other states dealing with Rwanda lag far behind China in infrastructure construction. As an example, in 2018, while Chinese building projects such as the Prime Minister’s Office complex and ‘Vision City’ were in the final stages of completion, the Indian prime minister Narendra Modi was delivering 200 cows as gifts to the Rwandan villagers (Negi 2018). While the exact nature of these investments is hard to assess, especially Rwanda’s debt to China and the conditionalities around the investment agreements and their repayment schedules, it would be fair to say that China retains the negotiating edge in bilateral trade. In a report published in 2018, SAIS-CARI claims that in the preceding 10 years, the East African states had borrowed $29.42 billion from China, and Rwanda alone had a loan amount of $346 million towards its transport sector.

The other important aspect of these infrastructure constructions is the employment, training and skills upgrade of the local Rwandans. On average, this small- to medium-sized project is expected to create between 200 and 1000 job opportunities, and the construction of the Administrative Office Complex generated around 260 jobs for the locals, who were also provided with skills training (Xinhua 2019). However, while construction projects are labour intensive, jobs generated in the sector are unstable, low paying, short term and mostly for uneducated people. Furthermore, these jobs rarely come with adequate job security or training that can be used to advantage, and as useful new experience in applying for more stable and permanent jobs in other firms. The number of jobs available for local Rwandan people is quite limited, as most of the Chinese firms prefer to import labour from China. Not only does the immigrant labour take jobs away from the locals, but they rarely mix with local communities in Rwanda. Chinese workers live either on the sites where they work or in exclusive enclaves that are built by the Chinese government for Chinese nationals (Mohan and Lampert 2013, 105). Thus, the Chinese investments do not necessarily have an enabling effect on the local economy, that would lead to sustainable developmental outcomes and the transfer of technology and expertise.

Conclusion

China represents both challenges and opportunities for Africa, as it is a relatively new actor with development polices different from those of Africa’s traditional trading partners. China
is an alternative source of credit lines and markets for Africa’s abundant resources, and its actions certainly engender possibilities of neo-colonialism. However, as the curious case of Rwanda demonstrates, the dependency between China and its African partners is complex due to the presence of other traditional actors and China’s unique approach and different output expectations. The prevalent discourses on China’s engagements with Africa focus on the quest for African natural resources. We argued that as a non-resource-rich country, Rwanda presents an anomaly, thus underlining the gap in the existing knowledge on China–Africa engagements. We discussed the inherent dependency in the neoliberal economic structure and presented the case for using dependency theory to understand and explain the contemporary globalised economy and South–South cooperation.

BRICS, as semi-peripheries, claim to represent South–South cooperation. However, in Africa they perpetuate the existing neoliberal economic policies that serve their own interests. In particular, China has signalled greater participation in Africa’s economy, assuming a leading role in trade and investment. China, along with other BRICS countries, replicates the trade and investment patterns of traditional core countries in the West, as it focusses on importing raw materials in exchange for manufactured goods, thus, contributing to the creation of dependent economies. In spite of its impressive economic successes, China is not accorded the status of a core state in the global system. It must be reiterated that China itself claims a developing state status, rejecting being grouped with the core states. Remarkably, while China is still considered a semi-periphery, it has emerged as the most credible challenger to the existing hegemonic order and has created complex dependencies in Africa, as the case of Rwanda demonstrates. The nature of this China–Africa dependency requires a much wider and deeper investigation through multiple comparative case studies.

While we hope to have contributed in a small way to the ongoing conversation about China–Africa relations in the policy and scholarly communities, we remain intellectually curious about the following questions: How much and to what degree can China present itself as a potential and viable alternative to the states at the periphery? To what degree does this South–South alternative empower the states at the periphery to assert some agency in their interactions with the prevailing hegemonic core states? What is the future of China’s engagements with the periphery, given its own global aspirations? Further research guided by these questions will reveal yet another aspect of Africa’s postcolonial development, involving a non-traditional and unpredictable patron and aspiring global hegemon.

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Notes

1. At the outset, we wish to underline that in our reference to China, we include the Chinese state, the state-owned enterprises, private business enterprises and other Chinese agencies.

2. The Third World generally comprises countries with shared colonial legacies including the countries of Latin America, Africa and Asia, which have received fewer benefits from their relationships with the core and are easy for the core countries to penetrate through trade, foreign capital, technology transfer, aid and foreign direct investment. In this paper, the terms ‘Third World’ and ‘underdeveloped/developing/developed countries’ are used as historical concepts, to facilitate the analysis and description, and are not used because of their semantic correctness. Briefly, the Third World comprises the dependent world. The relationships between the core (North) and the periphery (South), however, created gaps not only between South and North, but also between South and South.

3. We cite the trade figures from two different sources; their real numbers may not match due to their methodological differences.

4. The largest trade partner of Africa is EU-27, the group of 27 countries of the European Union excluding the United Kingdom.

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