One of the truism of societies stricken by the coronavirus crisis is that it brings out the best and the worst in people. In the case of South Africa and China, the repatriation of nearly two hundred South Africans from the epicentre of the virus in good health after 54 days in lockdown in Wuhan caused President Cyril Ramaphosa to thank China profusely for the good treatment of its citizens during confinement. He also expressed great admiration for the success of restrictions in stopping the spread of Covid-19 and, in late March, adopted the same approach when declaring an unprecedented national lockdown to halt the progress of the virus in South Africa (Ramaphosa 2020). The corporate sector in China and South Africa, too, was quick to demonstrate equal measures of generosity and business acumen in this time of crisis. Alibaba’s Jack Ma, newly engaged in philanthropic works in Africa, donated Covid-19 test kits and hundreds of thousands of face masks to the continent in mid-March while
a South African manufacturer of face masks gave away tens of thousands of its products to China, immediately securing massive orders from wholesalers (Nyabiage and Choi 2020; Chalumbira 2020). Others were far less generous or scrupulous, such as the Chinese businessman in Durban apprehended by the South Africa police for using child labour in squalid conditions to produce face masks to meet the spike in demand, drawing a swift retort from the Chinese consulate quick to emphasise the sizable contribution China makes to the anaemic economy (Singh 2020). All of this occurred against the backdrop of a rise in incidents in South Africa demonising the country’s sizable Chinese community as a source of the contagious disease, tapping into the troubled society’s very localised and virulent ‘social disease’ of xenophobia (Pon 2020).

South Africa’s relationship with China is a complex one, reflecting in part changing domestic conditions over time in a society shaped by the brutalities of colonialism and apartheid built on the back of extractive industries, commercial agriculture and state-led industrialisation. The coming of democracy opened up the possibility of diplomatic ties with China and its economy to Chinese FDI, though both—for very different reasons—took far longer than anticipated to be realised and, in the case of investment, to have an economic impact. It is a relationship refracted through the rough-cut prism of international politics and Africa’s continental affairs where South Africa’s leadership ambitions have taken it to the pinnacles of power and prestige at the UN Security Council, the G20, the African Union Commission and BRICS. And, it is a relationship lived through the interaction of communities, in particular layers of Chinese migration dating back to the late nineteenth century right up to the present day which has made its mark on South Africa’s diverse society. In short, it is a relationship of paradoxes and promise that acts as a bellwether for the peculiar combination of idealism, parochialism, fractured domestic interests, economic ambitions and hegemonic intent that constitutes the South African experience over the past two and a half decades.

This book intends to uncover the wide-ranging and sometimes paradoxical facets that compose this, to employ the prevailing diplomatic jargon, comprehensive strategic partnership between South Africa and China today. It is a relationship with distinctive features that sometimes set it apart from South Africa’s ties with ‘traditional’ global actors such as Britain or even the United States, in the sense that the physical distance is matched by broad historical and cultural distances, gaps that are bridged by ideology, commercial opportunism and ordinary social
interactions. It is these differing levels of analysis and sectoral or case study specific assessments that, to our minds, provide the basis for a collective understanding of complexities of ties. Much of our focus is on relations since 1994—when South Africa re-emerged on the global stage inaugurating an unbroken period of democratically elected governance by the ANC—and more importantly, we consider the changes and shifts that have taken place under Zuma and Ramaphosa’s respective leaderships. The key themes explored in the different parts of the book focus on aspects of diplomacy and foreign relations, including the role of the media; economic engagement at macro and micro-levels, including the role of labour; and finally, broadly construed examinations into identity, community and social relations as seen through the South African Chinese community.

**Paradoxes of Engagement**

Myth plays a role, as it does for all national stories, in the forging of diplomatic relationship be they putative enemies or erstwhile allies, and this has been the case with South Africa and China. Beijing had always supported African independence movements and Mao Zedong even met with (ANC) leaders like Walter Sisulu and South African Communist Party (SACP) stalwarts like Yusuf Dadoo in the early 1960s as the newly banned political party sought international support (Ellis 2012; Alden and Alves 2008). At the same time, revolutionary solidarity between China and the liberation movements subscribed to the reductionist logic of the Sino-Soviet split, with the SACP’s close ties to the Soviet Union profoundly influencing the position of its ANC ally in seeing China as a divisive force in the unifying impulses of the socialist camp (Ellis 2012; Shubin 2009). Following from this same logic, it was the Pan-Africanist Congress which garnered Beijing’s support as a liberation movement with, at least initially, a more radical agenda and methods (Lodge 1983). During the apartheid era, the National Party government in South Africa—despite its open support for Taiwan—pursued a quiet strategy of low-level military cooperation with China including opening an office in Beijing in the early 1980s and arms sales for use in selective southern African conflicts (Open Secrets 2017).

Nelson Mandela’s presidency (1994–1998), celebrated in Beijing as well as around the world, was marked by the curious delay in switching diplomatic recognition, a situation explored by Williams and Lu in this
book. Likewise it is true that while bilateral relations under Thabo Mbeki (1999–2008) were largely cordial, there was more emphasis on his grand continual strategy of African Renaissance and the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) whose primary aim was to strengthen aid and investment ties with the G8 countries (Alden and Wu 2016, 207). Nevertheless, some of the very institutional foundations that led to the forging of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2010 under his successor Jacob Zuma were established under the Mbeki administration such as a binational commission and the signature Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), a triennial meeting between China and African counterparts. Towards the end of his tenure in office, Mbeki did publicly express worry over Chinese long-term intentions and the creation of a dependent relationship (Alden and Wu 2016, 207).

Intimately linked to the above themes is the impact of domestic dynamics within South Africa in shaping bilateral ties with China. For instance, South Africa experienced tens of thousands of jobs lost in its textiles and clothing industries to more affordable imports from places like China and Bangladesh. With criticism led by the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the SACP, Mbeki’s administration was pressured to appeal to Beijing for voluntarily restraint of exports (Alden 2007). South Africa’s relatively developed economy has attracted Chinese commercial interests and accelerated a booming two-way trade largely cohering to the north-south exchange of commodities for finished manufactured goods. This generated its own concerns, with South African officials petitioning the Chinese government for greater investment in value-added production facilities (‘beneficiation’, particularly employment creation) in the mining sector and elsewhere since 2009. At another level, South African firms both at home and especially in other parts of the continent are direct economic competitors with Chinese firms. For South African businesses and local labour markets, the price and other advantages that Chinese firms’ tend to have brings great pressure to bear on their own costs and wage packages. And, for Chinese South Africans the pride and opportunities growing out of deepening links with Beijing nonetheless carry with it exposure to local societal prejudices as well as entanglement with the machinations and political intrigues of foreign interests.

The paradoxes experienced in South Africa-China ties extend into international relations. Both countries share economic and geopolitical
interests in other African countries and often hold similar stances—including ‘representation’ of voices from the South—on the global stage and, where there are differences, manage to maintain regular consultation on such issues. South Africa’s unique standing as Africa’s only BRICS country has coincided with a strengthening of its international cooperation with China and, at the level of party-to-party ties, a closer collaboration. The idea of a Chinese development model, especially in the form of the Special Economic Zones at Coega or in Limpopo province, as a tool for rapid economic growth emerged from successful examples of Chinese investment in other parts of Africa.

However, China’s expanding role on the continent can spark dissent within South African circles. For instance, a Chinese shipment of arms directed to Zimbabwe at the height of elections in 2008 commandeered by COSATU at the Durban docks, set in motion criticism by South African civil society and regional governments (Fritz 2009). Given that human rights featured so prominently in the anti-apartheid struggle and the early years of Mandela’s foreign policy, there continues to be expectations that South Africa will lead in this area. South Africa’s careful positioning on Beijing’s core interests like the South China Sea and treatment of Uighurs, reflected in its unwillingness to endorse China’s achievements in human rights at the UN Human Rights Council, continues to guide its approach (Shinn and Eisenman 2020, 285–286). At the same time, sidestepping human rights concerns in China at the UN or blocking the Dalai Lama’s visits to South Africa, while generating a sharp rebuke from opposition parties, overlooks survey data which suggests 44% of South Africans give preference to ‘promoting economic growth’ over ‘promoting human rights’ (Van der Westhuizen and Smith 2013, 8).

Bilateral ties experienced a surge in the aftermath of the signing of $6.5 billion worth of deals in December 2015, but one which brought with it a host of complexities and problems as well. South Africa’s simmering domestic political scandal of ‘state capture’—embodied by the business and government dealings of the Gupta family during Zuma’s second term—as well as financial uncertainty both at home and internationally, along with currency depreciation, have had ripple effects on ties that are still felt at present. Concurrently, state prosecutor’s investigations have exposed Chinese firms’ involvement in some of the corrupted deals which transpired under Zuma, eliciting criticism and even court orders. Still, the expectation that Chinese finance can play a key role in resolving the perennial economic problems facing South Africa, be they the ailing condition
of state-owned enterprises or integrating South Africa in emerging global production chains, continues to drive policymaking in South Africa. More recently, Chinese loans to state-owned enterprises under Ramaphosa’s leadership reflect concerns about the debt owed to China but also for opposition parties, the opaque nature of these agreements. What becomes clear is that the current leadership continues to inherit and is required to address issues of suspicion and trust between South African constituencies and China. Ironically, these suspicions have their parallel in debates within China itself: Chinese loans mooted to ailing state-owned enterprises like ESKOM are subject to criticism for their absence of returns or Chinese netizen outrage at expenditures that they believe could be better directed towards inward development.

Finally, it needs to be recognised that the story of bilateral ties is still primarily told through the media’s gaze, with South African reporting on relations tending to be cautiously optimistic, particularly when reporting from an economic lens (Wasserman 2018). On social media, by way of contrast, impassioned commentary emerges when emotive issues like the ivory trade are discussed or when particular interests—sometimes economic in nature—are threatened. And behind all of these aggregate statistics, diplomatic utterances and trending ideas, are human stories that illuminate real content of lived experience of South Africa-China relations. The dominating narratives of any single issue do not arrive at the full picture of the story; and neither does personal sentiments and disagreement bring society any closer towards a solution to longstanding problems, such as finding a policy or collective response to illegal wildlife poaching.

**PART AND CHAPTER OVERVIEWS**

In order to make sense of contemporary South Africa-China ties in all its diversity, we have selected themes and authors whose recognised expertise provides historically informed, analytically rich and grounded analysis of these dynamics.

In keeping with this, Part I begins by addressing important historical foundations of bilateral ties and moves to examining the trajectory of these in light of changes in South Africa and the world at large. All of these contributions by Williams, Alden and Wu, and Jiang point to a long-standing debate over the role of the leadership versus contingencies in shaping policy outcomes. This is reflected in Chapter 1 where Williams’
focuses on Nelson Mandela’s complex decision to switch recognition from the Republic of China (ROC) to the People’s Republic of China (PRC) where the role of national leader and the party they lead are demonstratively intertwined with regard to foreign policy decision-making. In Chapter 2, Alden and Wu pick up the institutional dynamics of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and how deepening diplomatic ties corresponded with increased domestic attention on leveraging Chinese finance to help South African development under Zuma and Ramaphosa. Jiang’s Chapter 3 gives us an inside look at China’s long-term strategic thinking on South Africa, providing a context for understanding how Beijing views the significance of changing dynamics in South Africa and its role on the African continent over time.

Part II examines the political economy of building the South Africa-China relationship, from its financial and commercial drives to changing local conditions and their impact on relations. This is set out in Le Pere’s Chapter 5, balancing China’s own global ambitions and interactions with South Africa within the wider context of the trade war between China and the United States. As much as government pronouncements indicate hope for prosperous relations and collaboration, the reality is South Africa has a range of factors that make it both tempting but also worrying as an investment environment. This situation is addressed in Chapter 6 by Stevens on South Africa-China trade and investment and the potential it holds for expanding South African ambitions to grow its manufacturing sector. The role of the media in defining agendas and influencing South African perceptions of China forms the bulk of analysis in van Staden and Wu’s contribution in Chapter 7.

In Part III, the focus shifts to a series of sectoral studies which aim to unpack the content of the relationship as experienced in distinctive areas such as manufacturing, agriculture, labour and education. In Chapter 8, Black and Yang drill down into how Special Economic Zones, supported by Chinese investment into manufacturing, are acting as policy vehicles for realising South African development aspirations in the Eastern Cape. China’s involvement in South African agriculture, through instruments as different as technical training programmes and FDI in commercial wineries is investigated by Harding, Jiang, Anseeuw and Alden in Chapter 9. Domestic contestation and discontent plays out in the response of South African trade unions to China’s growing influence in the South African economy, as underscored in Chapter 10 by Muresan and Naidu. Monyae’s Chapter 11 on the educational sector
and, in particular, the soft power of Confucius Institutes as a means of expanding knowledge and projecting cultural values in South African society.

In Part IV, the local Chinese community is put under the spotlight and the impact of changing economic circumstances and migratory patterns affect commerce, security and identity. In Chapter 11, Park and Chen reflect how the post-2015 period has affected the activities of Chinese traders who have had to search for new economic opportunities. Van Wyk, writing in Chapter 12, investigates the effects that increased inequality in South African society has had on community safety and response. Finally, Ho provides a personal account of growing up as a Chinese South African and illustrates how the perceived homogeneity of the Chinese community is itself a contested concept.

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