

BOOK REVIEW

Lina Benabdallah. *Shaping the Future of Power: Knowledge Production and Network-Building in China-Africa Relations*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020. xi + 170 pp. List of Abbreviations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$80.00. Cloth. ISBN: 978-0-472-07454-9.

Shaping the Future of Power: Knowledge Production and Network-Building in China-Africa Relations by Lina Benabdallah is an important work; it is interesting, extensively researched, and well-written. It begins with the question of whether or not China is employing the same modalities of power projection as other global powers, an analysis which contributes to the field of International Relations theory. Benabdallah finds that it is not, and that consequently traditional realist explanations which emphasize material capabilities and dimensions of power are ill-suited to study the emergence of rising powers in the Global South. Rather, the author argues that China projects its power differently, drawing on China's engagement with Africa as a case study.

Benabdallah develops a novel and innovative conceptualization of power in international relations. In particular, she draws attention to the (understudied) importance of knowledge production and skills transfer in the diffusion of norms or what constitutes acceptable or appropriate behavior. However, this is not an impact assessment; rather, the focus is on how the Chinese state builds transnational networks to express, disseminate, and expand its power.

The author adapts the Chinese concept of *guanxi*, which roughly translates to social capital or trust, to its international relations to develop a theory of what she calls "relational productive power," which is expressed through programs of public diplomacy, technical trainings and exchanges, and student internships to China. In the author's analysis, social relations are productive of power relations, hence "relational productive power." However, what exactly is being produced is unclear. Benabdallah argues that power strengthens social relations, but no assessment is undertaken as to how effective the modalities of engagement undertaken are in achieving their objectives. Admittedly, this would have been too much to undertake in one book-length project, and the author does note the need for more research in this area.

While not disputing the importance of material dimensions of power, Benabdallah argues that these more relational and ideational aspects are equally important, although it is not clear against what metrics these relative dimensions should be judged. However, based on data supplied by the author, it is clear that while Chinese state loans to Africa have decreased in recent years, the scale of scholarships for African students has increased substantially. This may partly be due to a reorientation toward Europe and the Middle East in Chinese foreign policy, particularly through the Belt and Road initiative, rather than validating the importance of relationality *per se*. Also, as concerns about Chinese “debt trap diplomacy” have mounted in Africa, there may be a reorientation toward other mechanisms or modalities of engagement.

Toward the end of the book, the author notes that there is no strict separation between material, ideational, and relational dimensions of power. This conclusion flows from her analysis, but it could have been noted earlier in relation to economic networks, for example. These are also ideational and relational, and this might have changed or qualified the author’s analysis. Likewise, public diplomacy may result in indirect economic gains.

The book is very successful in showing how China’s rhetoric of sovereign equality and South-South solidarity “makes power relations less visible/confrontational and therefore more successful” (16). The author is also mindful of the contradictions between the stated Chinese foreign policy of non-interference and the actuality of its breach in practice. An example of this is the practices of relationality which help (re)produce African militaries through trainings as certain types of institutions. Benabdallah reveals that while China seems not to have an extensive, overt military presence on the continent, military training, peace keeping, and the use of “private” security contractors to protect its assets give it extensive influence in this area, enabling it on the surface to respect the sovereignty of “recipient” countries. It may be a cause for concern that Confucius Institutes at universities on the continent, which teach Chinese and promote cultural exchanges, are largely or fully funded by the Chinese government, which gives it much more influence over their curricula and staffing than in other world regions. This is an excellent, empirically-based and rich, but theoretically sophisticated book which should be widely read by all those interested in the evolution of China-Africa relations.

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doi:10.1017/asr.2020.103

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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

- Monson, Jamie, and Stephanie Rupp. 2013. "Africa and China: New Engagements, New Research." *African Studies Review* 56 (1): 21–44. doi:[10.1017/asr.2013.4](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2013.4).
- Park, Yoon Jung. 2013. "Perceptions of Chinese in Southern Africa: Constructions of the 'Other' and the Role of Memory." *African Studies Review* 56 (1): 131–53. doi:[10.1017/asr.2013.9](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2013.9).
- Rupp, Stephanie. 2013. "Ghana, China, and the Politics of Energy." *African Studies Review* 56 (1): 103–30. doi:[10.1017/asr.2013.8](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2013.8).