



Chinese Agricultural Training Courses for African Officials: Between Power and Partnerships

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Summary. — Each year around 10,000 African officials are trained in China, across a range of themes. Among these, agriculture and development policy are prominent. In this paper we ask what lies behind this program, and how it fits with wider commercial, diplomatic, and geopolitical ambitions of China in Africa. Through work carried out in China, Ethiopia, Ghana, and Zimbabwe, involving attending courses, interviewing participants and lecturers, examining curricula and reviewing policy documents, we assess Chinese agricultural development courses, supported by China’s Ministry of Commerce. Contrary to the argument that a singular “Beijing Consensus” is being pushed, we find a wide range of course offerings from a range of institutions across China, and extensive debate about agricultural development. This reflects the internal Chinese debate, and an approach to development emphasizing demonstration, experiment, and learning. Course participation involves officials from across Africa, and does not correlate with Chinese commercial interests in Africa. Commercial opportunities may be linked to training, and some courses are run by companies, although instances of take-up are few. The overall direct and immediate impact on agricultural development in Africa appears limited; instead the training program must be seen in relation to building relationships among a large group of African officials, and so the exertion of “soft power” in foreign policy, as part of development cooperation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Training courses for African officials have become one of China’s most ambitious and important forms of cooperation with the continent, and yet one of the least researched. Every year the Chinese Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) facilitates training courses in China for thousands of civil servants in developing countries from all over the world to learn different aspects of China’s own development experience. Of them, roughly 10,000 officials are from Africa, and all of them are trained by China’s foremost universities, state bureaux, and private companies.

Many other aspects of China’s overseas educational engagements and knowledge transfers have been documented before (Bräutigam, 1994; King, 2013; Li, 2013), but this paper aims to present an in-depth study, based on fieldwork in China, Ethiopia, Ghana, and Zimbabwe, on China’s short-term technical and policy training courses on agriculture for the first time. China’s short-term training course program offers an opportunity to assess the nature of Chinese aid and cooperation, and how technical and policy engagements articulate with wider political and diplomatic ambitions, and the exertion of Chinese “soft power”. Debates surrounding China’s aid interventions in Africa have speculated on the existence of a “Beijing Consensus” in which the Chinese government exports its model of authoritarian state capitalism to the developing world (Halper, 2012; Williamson, 2012).

Given the scale of this program and its continued expansion, it is important to ask in addition to assessing the immediate impacts of the trainings on knowledge and skill transfer, what lies behind such a program, and how it fits with wider commercial, diplomatic and geopolitical ambitions of China in Africa. For example, we ask are these training courses aimed at selling Chinese goods? Do they target African countries

with natural resources that are of interest to Chinese companies? And on what basis are candidates chosen for the training courses?

The MOFCOM training courses therefore offer a fascinating insight into the feasibility of knowledge and experience transfers from China to Africa. Not only because it is African policy-makers and technicians that are being trained, but also because many of the Chinese trainers have had first-hand experiences of effecting the change that brought about their country’s own developmental achievements. With regard to agriculture in particular, there is a view of Chinese experiences being especially transferable due to claimed similarities with many African countries, as China has a range of agro-climatic conditions to match any African environment (Li *et al.*, 2012). Since the 1960s, there have been numerous Chinese engagements in African agriculture, often focused on technology and skills transfer, through a range of training programs, demonstration centers and investments (Amanor & Chichava, 2016; Bräutigam & Zhang, 2013). This latest round of investment in training and exchange is thus part of a longer experience, and builds on this.

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Following a brief presentation of our research methods, the paper begins by situating these training courses within the context of relevant literature to date. We explore three themes: the existence and implications of a so-called “Beijing Consensus”; the role of commercial interests in development cooperation; and the projection of “soft power”, with aid linked to foreign policy. We in turn ask how each theme is represented in the design and conduct of training courses. The main body of the paper will then respond to these questions looking at how training courses emerged in China’s aid architecture, what they consist of, and what impacts they have had on African officials so far.

2. INVESTIGATING CHINESE TRAINING COURSES

There are three tiers of training course. The first and most common is for technical civil servants, such as extension workers, and these courses may last for up to 3 months. They have a focus on practical experiences and hands-on training. The second tier is for more senior officials, and for shorter periods (maybe 2–4 weeks). These still have a fieldwork component, but are more about observing project implementation and policy practices. The third tier of training course is for ministerial-level officials, and permanent secretaries or equivalents in the civil service. In this case the training course is often organized around an individual minister’s timetable and would last no longer than a fortnight. According to one course manager, they last around 10 days and are interspersed with meetings with political counterparts, and relevant business leaders in China.¹ In 2012, for example, a State Minister for Forestry in Ethiopia came on a course and met Li Keqiang when he was the then Vice-Premier.² We interviewed participants in all three tiers of training and exchange, but our participant observation and detailed interviews concentrated on the lower tier groups, focused on technicians and more junior officials.

Fieldwork for this paper was conducted in 2013 and 2014 in China, Ethiopia, Ghana, and Zimbabwe. We attended three training courses for African officials in Beijing. One focused on agricultural mechanization and was hosted by the Chinese Academy of Mechanization Sciences (June 2013), another focused on agricultural extension and was hosted by the Ministry of Agriculture’s Foreign Economic Cooperation Centre (June 2013), and the final one focused on rural development and poverty reduction, and was hosted by the International Poverty Reduction Centre (July 2013). Each course lasted between 14 and 21 days, within which we attended a number of different sessions and had discussions with lecturers and participants.

We also conducted semi-structured interviews with 10 training course managers in Beijing³ (four of whom taught courses themselves) from separate institutions, and in Africa we conducted 36 semi-structured interviews with African officials, including 18 from Zimbabwe, 14 from Ghana and 4 from Ethiopia. 34 of these interviewees had attended training courses and two had not.

Data on short-term training courses are limited, and so we were able to compile only aggregate figures from official documents. Specific data on financing and participant details were not publicly available; however, we were able to triangulate with the lists of training courses posted on the website of the Academy for International Business Officials (AIBO, 商务部国际商务官员研修学院). We also undertook a detailed analysis of the “MOFCOM Manual for the Management of Foreign Aid Training” (商务部对外援助培训项目实施管理工作

手册 (2010年8月修订版)), which gave a valuable insight as to what was expected of the training courses by MOFCOM.

3. UNDERSTANDING TRAINING COURSES AS PART OF “DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION”: THREE THEMES

Technical and policy training has been an important element of development cooperation over many years. A “modernization” vision saw “transfer of technology” and, with this, particular skills as central. Unique elements in “successful” development experiences were packaged and presented in training courses, geared variously at senior policymakers, technicians and field practitioners and students. This has been the case across development programs, whether from OECD countries, China, or institutions such as the World Bank, and has involved courses ranging from agriculture to health to manufacturing and wider development policy (King, 2007, 2013).

In the 1950s, technology and knowledge transfers from North to South were presented as an opportunity for the Global South to “catch up” with the living standards and economic success of the industrialized North (King and McGrath, 2004, p.18). While there have been extensive critiques of the “knowledge for development” paradigm in development (e.g., Arce and Long, 1992; McFarlane, 2006), and some particularly applied to Africa (Chambers, 1983; Mbembé, 2001), resonances of such an approach remain, and training is seen as central for development. In the discourse around South–South cooperation, the lessons of the successful BRICS countries are seen as potential models for transfer, including through collaborations with Western aid programs (Amann and Barrientos, 2014; IDS, 2014; Scoones *et al.*, 2016).⁴

In China’s case, it was already offering various forms of development cooperation with its partners from the early 1950s, but since its growth into an economic powerhouse, its development assistance capacities have grown (Bräutigam, 2009). From a very early stage, China sought to offer developmental assistance to its partners on terms distinct from other donors. Although the specifics of China’s programs have evolved over time, Zhou Enlai’s “Eight Principles of Foreign Aid” from 1963 still today offer a good sense of the Chinese approach. These included a rejection of any conditions placed on aid-recipient countries and a commitment to “mutual benefit”, both characteristics that remain the hallmarks of Chinese aid today.

Without a doubt, China’s increased aid spending and cooperation programs represent one of the most important recent shifts in the development sector. Among these growing engagements, African countries have emerged as some of the largest recipients of Chinese aid and most frequent partners in cooperation programs. According to the Chinese Government’s 2014 White Paper on “China’s Foreign Aid”, Africa received 52% of China’s foreign assistance funds during 2010–12 (Xinhua, 2014). Like the North–South technology and knowledge transfers that came before, many are now very interested in the question of what China can offer African countries in terms of development experiences (Li *et al.*, 2013; Ravallion, 2009; Zafar, 2010). China’s short-term training courses offer an opportunity to understand the nature of Chinese aid and cooperation through the lens of training courses on agriculture and rural development. In this paper we focus both on the immediate impacts (the “transfers”), but also the wider context for training, and how training efforts fit within a wider commercial and diplomatic effort at the heart of China’s engagement with Africa.

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