

Two Distant Giants

China and Nigeria Perceive Each Other

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between the giant of Asia, China, and the giant of Africa, Nigeria, and the ways these two countries interact with each other. For much of the early period from 1960–2000, there was little relationship. Furthermore, this relationship does not follow the most common Western narrative of “China in Africa”: that China is looking to Africa purely for natural resources, especially energy, and does not care about other aspects of Africa. In fact, Chinese oil imports from Nigeria are fairly modest, and Beijing’s overall imports from Nigeria are only one-eighth of China’s exports to Nigeria, which have been growing primarily in consumer goods. China has invested over USD 2.6 billion in Nigeria in recent years, and thousands of Chinese have gone there either as tourists, merchants, or construction engineers. It is also noteworthy that there is a large Nigerian migrant community in China, primarily in Guangzhou. Thus, both countries view each other as important; by examining public opinion surveys, popular media, newspaper accounts and editorials, this article will reveal that the relationship is much more complex than the simplistic idea of “resource diplomacy.”

Introduction

Nigeria is an important country, the largest in Africa. China is an important country, the largest in Asia and the world. However, it is only recently that the two countries have begun to establish a significant relationship. Nigeria and China are two regional giants, yet distant. And their relationship has been less than one might expect for two large developing nations for a variety of reasons: history, missed opportunities, and rival relationships. That appears to be changing, but it remains to be seen whether the momentum of the ties currently being built will be sustained.

In foreign policy analysis, it is a fairly straightforward process to explain poor bilateral relations; there are often a multitude of contributing factors. Explaining deep and warm relations also has multiple aspects that contribute to good ties and which prevent minor irritants from festering. Explaining nonrelations between two countries that are distant and small is not challenging either. However, explaining the relationship between China and Nigeria and why that relationship

has been so insignificant for so long is a challenge; there are a number of factors that would lead one to believe this ought to have been a much more significant relationship than it was for the first 50 years. This article will examine relations between the two countries from the perspective of diplomatic relations, security relations, economic relations, and social relations, and then see how Nigerian and Chinese media and popular opinion view the relationship.

Diplomatic Relations

Early Period

Nigeria and China share a national day: 1 October. For the first 11 years following Nigerian independence, this was about all that the two countries had in common, and in contrast to the relatively good relations China had with Tanzania, Zambia, Ghana, Mali, and Sudan in the 1960s, China's interactions with Nigeria did not start off well and remained chilly or indifferent for decades.

When Nigeria became independent on 1 October 1960, its prime minister, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, was unlikely to be friendly to the communists in China, who were then in the eleventh year in power. Balewa and the Nigerian government were conservative, democratic, pro-Western, and somewhat hostile toward China's few diplomatic contacts in West Africa, such as Ghana's president Kwame Nkrumah and Guinea's Ahmed Sékou Touré.¹ A Nigerian economic delegation led by Federal Minister of Finance Festus Okotie-eboh visited Beijing in June 1961, but nothing came of the venture, which was rejected by the Nigerian side.²

Two simultaneous events would make the (non-) relationship of Beijing and Lagos even worse: the Nigerian Civil War (1967–70) and the Cultural Revolution in China (1966–76). China split ideologically from the Soviet Union in 1963 and began to increasingly support extreme leftist organizations around the world that opposed both the Soviets and the United States. In Africa, this meant backing a variety of small, marginal groups that opposed colonialism and supported Maoism.³ In the case of Nigeria, once the Soviets announced their support for the Nigerian federal government in opposition to the secessionist Biafran Republic, China started to support the rebels, beginning in Autumn 1968.⁴ Beijing did not officially recognize Biafra, even though two of China's closest East African partners—Tanzania and Zambia, for whom it was building the TAZARA railway—did recognize it, but the reasoning laid out in April 1968 by Tanzania's president Julius Nyerere had nothing to do with anti-Soviet sentiment but rather with the humanitarian crisis the Nigerian federal armed forces' siege of Biafra was creating.⁵ After the Biafran rebellion was crushed in January 1970, however, the federal government endeavored to achieve reconciliation with countries that had backed

Biafra, including Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, Tanzania, and Zambia.⁶ Beijing's foreign policy also became more pragmatic, and in February 1971, the China and Nigeria officially recognized each other. In 1972, officials signed Nigerian–Chinese trade and economic cooperation agreements, and in a sign of improving relations, Nigerian head of state Yakubu Gowon visited Beijing in 1974, meeting with Mao Zedong.⁷ This was a time when Nigeria was flush with oil money, had an active foreign policy in Africa, and even had a modest foreign aid program of its own.⁸ In short, Nigeria did not need China's arms or aid in the way Zambia and Tanzania had in the 1960s. The establishment of diplomatic relations was polite and formal but was initiated by Beijing rather than Lagos.⁹ The conciliation would not last long, however. A military coup led by Generals Murtala Muhammad and Olusegun Obasanjo overthrew Gowon in July 1975; the subsequent military junta firmly backed the Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA, People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola) in the Angolan Civil War—a group that was also receiving Soviet and Cuban aid. China, on the other hand, was backing two other factions, the Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola (FNLA, National Front for the Liberation of Angola) and União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola (UNITA, National Union for the Total Independence of Angola), in that civil war. Once again, Beijing and Lagos found themselves on opposite sides of key African issues, but though the relationship was tested, it was not broken. There were official visits during this period, though none higher than vice-premier level on the Chinese side until 1996: Geng Biao in October 1978, Huang Hua in November 1981, Tian Jiyun in November 1984, and Wu Xueqian in March 1990.¹⁰

After Beijing began market-based reforms in 1978, China's attention to Africa waned, shifting attention to the West and its neighbors in East Asia. Similarly, the Nigerian Second Republic, under its president Shehu Shagari, stepped back from the foreign policy activism of the Mohammed–Obasanjo period.¹¹ Xinhua News Agency cut its Africa budget and the number of correspondents in the continent declined from 72 in 1979 to 48 in 1984.¹² China's trade with Nigeria did not exceed USD 100 million until 1993 and did not exceed USD 1 billion until 2001.

There were a few high-level visits in the late 1970s and some agricultural cooperation, but little else.¹³ Lagos was mostly concerned with Nigeria's economic disaster of the 1980s when oil prices collapsed, and the nation was internationally isolated during the brutal regime of Gen Sani Abacha (1993–98). Ibrahim Babangida visited in September 1984, though this was before he took over control in Nigeria in August 1985. Abacha did visit China in October 1989 (shortly after the Tiananmen Square Massacre), though he was not yet in charge in Nigeria.

Chinese foreign minister Qian Qichen visited Nigeria in January 1995 (though there is no mention of the event in his memoirs). State Councilor Luo Gan and Premier Li Peng visited in September 1996 and May 1997, respectively. The Abacha regime did hint that isolation and condemnation by the West for the 1995 execution of Ogani activist Ken Saro-Wiwa would force Nigeria to turn to other sources of trade and arms, including China, but little came of the threat, and Turkey and Iran were much more active in shielding the government in Abuja (the new seat of the Nigerian government) during this period than China.¹⁴ And Beijing, in the aftermath of its diplomatic isolation following the June 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre, had no incentive to align itself with other pariah regimes; the main focus of China's diplomatic initiative of the early 1990s was directed at East Asia in its "Good Neighbor Policy."

General Abacha's Defense Chief of Staff, Gen Abdulsalam Abubakar, visited China in August 1997, but this was one of the few official visits between the two countries. General Abubakar soon rose to greater heights in Nigeria, assuming the reins of government and quickly ushering in democratization in 1999 after the sudden death of General Abacha in 1998. Thus, in the four decades between Nigeria's independence in 1960 to 2000, these two giants managed only the bare minimum of relations. That would begin to change on the eve of the twenty-first century.

The Twenty-first Century

China's rapid growth of the 1980s and 1990s soon paled in comparison to its economic expansion in the twenty-first century, and with the increase of China's economic size came an increase in Beijing's diplomatic footprint around the world, and quite notably in Africa. The starting point was 2000, with the hosting of the first Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC, 中非合作论坛/*Zhōng Fēi hézuò lùntán*), a triennial meeting held alternately in China and an African hosting nation. The third meeting in Beijing in November 2006 was particularly noteworthy, with 35 African heads of state and government in attendance, including Nigeria's Olusegun Obasanjo.¹⁵ It was also a meeting that grabbed attention in the West regarding China's diplomatic initiatives in Africa.

Although Nigeria has actively participated in the FOCAC meetings, Abuja has increasingly seen high-level visits as a primary mechanism for relations with other major countries, including China.¹⁶ President Obasanjo made the first state visit to China in 1999 (although China had treated Gowon's 1974 visit as such).¹⁷ Obasanjo returned in 2001, Jiang Zemin visited Nigeria in April 2002 (China's first state visit there), Obasanjo returned to China in 2005, and Hu Jintao and Obasanjo both exchanged visits in 2006. Nigerian president Umaru Yar'Adua visited China in 2008. His successor, Goodluck Jonathan visited in 2013, and the

next president, Muhammadu Buhari, visited China in 2016 and again in 2018 as part of the FOCAC meeting. In contrast, three US presidents have visited Nigeria: Carter in April 1978, Clinton in August 2000, and George W. Bush in July 2003 (all three met with President Obasanjo). Nigerian presidents have made 19 visits to America, though many have been “working visits” or side visits at international summits.

South Africa as Competitor

Nigeria’s sudden and welcome democratization in 1999 was the second piece of good news coming out of sub-Saharan Africa in the 1990s that captured world attention. The final advent of majority rule in South Africa and the election of Nelson Mandela as president in 1994 was welcomed throughout Africa, and especially in Nigeria, which had promoted the elimination of white minority rule since the mid-1970s as an “honorary front-line state” in the fight against colonialism and apartheid.¹⁸ Indeed, for much of the 1970s and 1980s, Nigeria saw itself, with its size and oil wealth, as the first among equals of African states and formally articulated a policy of “Continental Jurisdiction” not unlike the US Monroe Doctrine. As Olayiwola Abegunrin, professor of international relations, summarized, “Nigeria’s belief in the philosophy of continental jurisdiction was intended to exclude any non-African nations from exercising influence on or interfering in the African continent.”¹⁹ However, once South Africa became democratic, Nigeria found itself with a competitor for the mantle of “Africa’s leader,” and the Abacha regime’s execution of dissidents in 1995—against Nelson Mandela’s public calls not to do so—meant that Nigeria’s leadership capability was only reestablished in May 1999 when it, too, returned to democracy under the Fourth Republic and its president, Olusegun Obasanjo.

By the twenty-first century, Nigeria and South Africa had become rivals for prestige, influence, and primacy for sub-Saharan Africa, something of which Chinese analysts were acutely aware.²⁰ For China (and other external powers), this means a delicate balance of honoring both countries and trying to stay neutral when Pretoria and Abuja competed for the prestige of selection for major international bodies, such as the African Union. South Africa’s Thabo Mbeki was the organization’s first chair, Obasanjo the third, and South Africa will assume the chair again in 2020 under Cyril Ramaphosa. Time and again, Nigeria has lost to South Africa, such as when the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) decided to add an African member in late 2010, inviting South Africa to join in 2011.²¹ China is arguably the major advocate for the BRICS and for South Africa’s inclusion. As Bruce Jones states, “In global negotiations at the IMF [International Monetary Fund], in the UN climate process, and at the UN, the United

States and the West still have huge institutional advantages, so it is only together that members of the BRICS can challenge current governance arrangements,” hence, China “... spends a great deal of diplomatic energy and finance shoring up the BRICS process.”²² China did, however, support the proposal for Nigeria to get a permanent seat on the UN Security Council (UNSC) in 2015, something Nigerians greatly appreciated and that cost China very little, since it has supported other large developing countries’ inclusion in the UNSC as well.

Another key compliment China paid to the giant African country was designating Nigeria a “strategic partner.” Most of China’s strategic partners (战略伙伴关系/ *Zhànlüè huòbàn guānxi*) are in Asia, where almost all China’s neighbors (with the notable exception of Japan) are designated as partners of some sort. Nigeria was the first African state to be designated as a strategic partner, though earning such distinction took some time. The official yearbook of China’s Foreign Ministry, *China’s Foreign Relations*, stated in 2006 that Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing met with Nigerian Foreign Minister Oluyemi Adeniji and signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) on the establishment of a strategic partnership based on talks between Presidents Hu Jintao and Olusegun Obasanjo in the former’s state visit to Nigeria in April.²³ Nigeria’s next president appears to have been a bit hesitant in accepting this distinction, and although President Umaru Musa Yar’Adua (2007–10) did make a state visit to China in early 2008, the joint communique from the meeting indicated only that the two sides “agreed to launch a strategic dialogue at an appropriate time.”²⁴ The strategic partnership was not fully implemented until Goodluck Jonathan assumed office in early 2010, following a visit by Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi.²⁵ Of course, South Africa became a strategic partner of China not long afterward, as Chinese diplomats tried to make sure the two most prominent states in Africa were kept on the same level. However, a hint of hierarchy can be found, when South African president Jacob Zuma visited Beijing in August 2010 for a state visit, Beijing elevated the South African strategic partnership to a comprehensive strategic partnership—one level up in China’s partnership hierarchy. Furthermore, then–Vice President Xi Jinping (in effect, president-designate) visited South Africa in November 2010; now president, Xi has yet to visit Nigeria.²⁶

Nigeria has also been supportive of China’s policies. One of the standard issues that China brings up in its discussions with other countries is the “One China Policy” directed against Taiwanese independence.²⁷ Nigeria has consistently supported Beijing’s position on this matter, and given the history of the Biafran efforts to secede from Nigeria in the late 1960s, the sentiment against separatism is probably sincere. Very recently, Nigeria joined 36 other countries in praising

China's "remarkable achievements in human rights" at a time when Western condemnation of Chinese policies toward Uighurs in Xinjiang has been mounting.²⁸

If Nigeria has been well-placed at China's side on these international issues, the country's geographic placement initially left Nigeria out of one of China's biggest initiatives of the twenty-first century, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which was grandly announced by Chinese president Xi Jinping in September 2013 in Astana, Kazakhstan. However, the initial idea laid out in the vaguely sweeping announcement saw the initiative connecting to Europe through the Indian Ocean, Red Sea, and the Mediterranean port of Venice, Marco Polo's starting point and a romantic historical terminus.

West Africa was nowhere in sight in these plans. Once again, the distance between these two giants seemed substantial. There has in recent years been discussion of expanding the BRI elsewhere, and the acting Chinese Consul-General in Lagos said that "Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation, has a strategic role to play in the Belt and Road Initiative."²⁹ No details were given, however. Nevertheless, at the September 2018 FOCAC summit, President Buhari attended and witnessed his foreign minister sign (along with other African states) an MOU supporting the BRI. Subsequently, officials signed a number of agreements for economic assistance worth USD 60 billion for African countries, including Xi Jinping's personal support for the Mambilla hydropower project.³⁰ Xi's need to maintain the appearance of momentum for the BRI—a project very much identified with him personally—has meant that the initiative's geographical focus is dissipating and its promised infrastructure will go to whatever countries agree to take it and the loans to finance it. Nigeria is one of those countries.

Security Relations

Nigeria's security threats are purely internal but very substantial. Despite having a large army in terms of personnel (around 200,000), Nigeria has endured two very significant rebellions: a rebellion in the Niger River delta region and now, more ominously, the Boko Haram rebellion, most active in the northeast part of the country. Chinese analysts are well aware of Boko Haram (博科圣地/*Bókē shèngdì*), which began in 2002 in the northeastern state of Borno but has staged attacks throughout Nigeria, including the capital, Abuja.³¹ Ethnic and local issues in the Niger River delta have cropped up since the 1990s. The area is the center of Nigeria's oil production, where the environmental consequences of drilling are most acute, but the revenues of oil exports are seldom reinvested in the region. Armed groups began in 2004, and kidnappings and seizures of foreign oil corporations' personnel and facilities began around 2006, along with piracy in the Gulf of Guinea. A presidential amnesty beginning in 2009 for rebels who turned them-

selves and their arms in brought the level of violence down for a while, but by 2016, a wide variety of groups had reemerged, launching fresh attacks on oil facilities.

Thus, Nigeria has been shopping for modern arms with which to fight these threats, and China has supplied some of them. In 2010, China sold 15 F-7NI fighter aircraft and trainers, along with air-to-air missiles, to Nigeria—a deal estimated to have been worth USD 251 million.³² Beijing also sold Abuja armored personnel carriers and five CH-3 unmanned combat aerial vehicles to Nigeria. These sales are estimated in the range of USD 271 million from 2010 to 2016, representing about one-quarter of Nigerian foreign arms purchases, the largest of any single country, although sales from the United States, Italy, and Russia are also notable. The latter has supplied combat helicopters, one of the Nigerian government's primary needs for counterinsurgency operations. China also donated two P-18 1,800-ton patrol corvettes (PLAN Type 056; NATO designation *Ji-angdao*) to the Nigerian Navy: the NNS *Centenary* (F91) and NNS *Unity* (F92). Given the recent rise of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea, the need for such ships is substantial. During President Buhari's September 2018 visit to China and the FOCAC meeting, he held discussions with President Xi, leading to an MOU in June 2019 for Beijing to supply another USD 8.1 million in support for Nigeria's counterterrorism efforts.³³

China's concerns for Nigeria's security are partially self-motivated. In 2007, 16 Chinese oil workers were kidnapped in the southern Niger Delta region, and the captain of a Chinese-owned (Panamanian-flagged) ship was killed in 2012, as were Chinese construction workers in Borno state, the center of the Boko Haram insurgency.³⁴ Four Chinese were kidnapped for ransom in 2018, and four killed in 2012–16.³⁵ China is also active in the broader region, contributing peacekeeping troops to the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA).³⁶

Economic Relations

Trade

Nigerian trade with China has grown substantially in the twenty-first century, but such growth has not been even, equal, or as expected. Given Beijing's need for energy supplies to fuel China's economic growth, one would expect that petroleum exports from Nigeria to China would constitute the bulk of exchange between the two countries. Western reporters and scholars often reference Chinese petroleum purchases from Nigeria. Consider, for example, Chris Buckley's 2013 article, "China's New Leader Tries to Calm African Fears of His Country's Economic Power," which mentions trade with Africa in 2011, saying "Oil, ore and

other commodities from Angola, Nigeria and other resource-rich countries make up much of that trade.”³⁷

However, China gets very little of its oil from Nigeria. This is not to say that Beijing is uninterested in Nigerian oil, and a number of deals have been made. However, a variety of factors (discussed below) have meant that China’s involvement in Nigeria has far less to do with energy development than sales of producer and especially consumer goods. These goods have fashioned a mixed legacy: for Nigerian consumers a far greater choice of goods at far cheaper prices than competitors made in Nigeria or Western countries—and for Nigerian traders, a much better volume of business.³⁸ However, as will be discussed below, this comes at some significant costs, which are negatives for Nigerians.

Table 1. Nigerian Foreign Trade, 2000–2018 (USD million)

Year	Imports from world	Exports to world	Imports from China	Imports from China as % world	Exports to China	Exports to China as % world
2000	\$22,764	\$8,183	\$253	1.11%	\$140	1.71%
2001	\$20,854	\$10,804	\$527	2.53%	\$127	1.18%
2002	\$17,256	\$12,019	\$739	4.28%	\$73	0.61%
2003	\$25,327	\$13,836	\$1,067	4.21%	\$123	0.89%
2004	\$35,507	\$15,915	\$1,015	2.86%	\$797	5.01%
2005	\$47,590	\$19,015	\$1,398	2.94%	\$908	4.77%
2006	\$62,346	\$22,143	\$1,755	2.81%	\$478	2.16%
2007	\$71,244	\$29,711	\$2,349	3.30%	\$926	3.12%
2008	\$91,946	\$42,758	\$4,190	4.56%	\$878	2.05%
2009	\$55,088	\$32,964	\$3,400	6.17%	\$1,547	4.69%
2010	\$82,479	\$36,895	\$4,159	5.04%	\$1,840	4.99%
2011	\$114,316	\$49,184	\$5,717	5.00%	\$2,722	5.53%
2012	\$113,326	\$44,366	\$5,785	5.10%	\$2,181	4.92%
2013	\$101,795	\$49,746	\$7,487	7.35%	\$2,658	5.34%
2014	\$98,994	\$53,314	\$9,603	9.70%	\$4,573	8.58%
2015	\$55,342	\$41,401	\$8,483	15.33%	\$2,131	5.15%
2016	\$37,831	\$32,066	\$6,418	16.97%	\$1,550	4.83%
2017	\$47,788	\$37,877	\$7,623	15.95%	\$2,782	7.35%
2018	\$64,188	\$43,630	\$8,507	13.25%	\$3,219	7.38%

Source: IMF DOTS, 2019.

The bilateral trade between China and Nigeria is heavily in China’s favor, and beginning in 2013, such trade became a very substantial portion of Nigeria’s overall foreign trade, with China becoming the top source of Nigerian imports.

In contrast, China’s foreign trade is immense, and Nigeria plays only a tiny role in China’s exports and no role whatsoever in its imports, as shown in table 2.

Table 2. Chinese foreign trade, 2000–2018 (USD million)

Year	Imports from world	Exports to world	Imports from Nigeria	Nigeria Imports as % world	Exports to Nigeria	Nigeria Exports as % world
2000	\$404,119	\$221,325	\$293	0.07%	\$564	0.25%
2001	\$417,209	\$227,797	\$227	0.05%	\$919	0.40%
2002	\$486,789	\$278,246	\$134	0.03%	\$1,047	0.38%
2003	\$611,931	\$386,197	\$72	0.01%	\$1,787	0.46%
2004	\$799,118	\$504,667	\$463	0.06%	\$1,719	0.34%
2005	\$987,714	\$603,624	\$527	0.05%	\$2,305	0.38%
2006	\$1,195,410	\$723,400	\$278	0.02%	\$2,856	0.39%
2007	\$1,455,306	\$859,452	\$537	0.04%	\$3,800	0.44%
2008	\$1,674,596	\$1,009,718	\$510	0.03%	\$6,758	0.67%
2009	\$1,421,496	\$914,776	\$898	0.06%	\$5,478	0.60%
2010	\$1,810,129	\$1,249,978	\$1,068	0.06%	\$6,695	0.54%
2011	\$2,062,702	\$1,528,895	\$1,580	0.08%	\$9,201	0.60%
2012	\$2,152,993	\$1,559,409	\$1,266	0.06%	\$9,308	0.60%
2013	\$2,236,576	\$1,651,145	\$1,543	0.07%	\$12,045	0.73%
2014	\$2,373,208	\$1,647,823	\$2,655	0.11%	\$15,449	0.94%
2015	\$2,312,298	\$1,442,952	\$1,237	0.05%	\$13,648	0.95%
2016	\$2,246,791	\$1,383,678	\$900	0.04%	\$10,326	0.75%
2017	\$2,436,584	\$1,663,024	\$1,615	0.07%	\$12,264	0.74%
2018	\$2,630,278	\$1,877,436	\$1,869	0.07%	\$13,687	0.73%

Source: IMF DOTS, 2019.

Figure 1 shows these trade data compared to Nigeria’s gross domestic product (GDP), calculated in constant 2010 US dollars. In effect, this is what we might expect: China’s trade with any country to roughly correlate with the size of that country’s economy. Thus, the scale is the percentage of China’s exports to Nigeria, its imports from Nigeria as a percentage of China’s worldwide trade, and the comparison (bar chart) is with Nigeria’s percentage of the world’s economy, which roughly peaked at 0.61 percent in 2014 and 2015 before the 2016–2017 economic

crash in Nigeria due to the drop in oil prices.³⁹ In looking at China's imports from Nigeria, there is a significant underperformance from what we might expect: imports from Nigeria never amounted to more than 0.11 percent of total Chinese imports, and usually quite a bit less (the mean percentage is 0.055). Exports, on the other hand, are a different story. From 2000 to 2012, exports roughly tracked the Nigerian GDP percentage: the correlation is 0.81. Beginning in 2013, however, Chinese exports to Nigeria have grown beyond the expected value, and in 2015, such exports were 0.94 percent of China's total exports. To be sure, this is not a great percentage of China's trade, and it is only in the last few years that China's exports have begun to exceed the expected value.

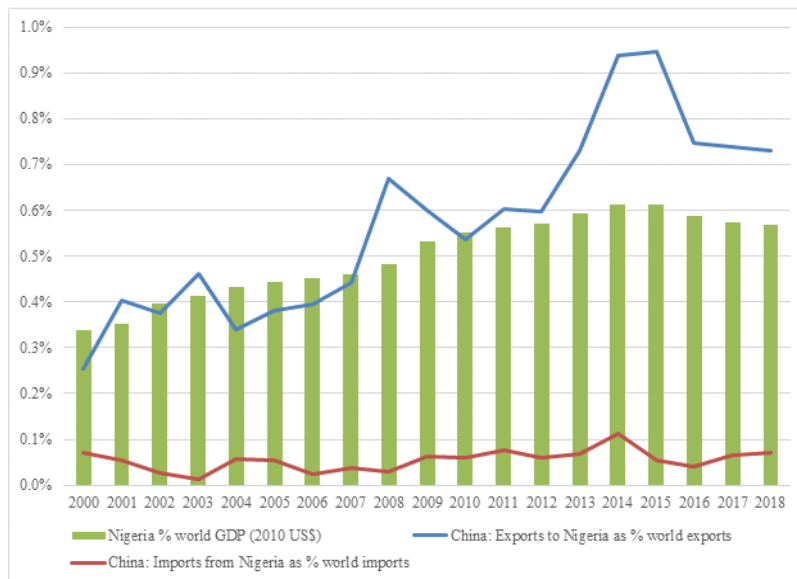


Figure 1. China: Trade with Nigeria Compared to Nigerian GDP, 2000–2018. (Source: GDP: World Bank World Development Indicators 2019; Trade: IMF DOTS 2019.)

One recent development may have a significant effect on Nigeria's foreign trade, namely the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), which was negotiated beginning in 2015 and concluded in March 2018. Once 44 countries ratified the pact, it came into effect, but there were several holdouts—most notably South Africa and Nigeria. President Buhari was explicitly protectionist in his announcement: “We will not agree to anything that will undermine local manufacturers and entrepreneurs, or that may lead to Nigeria becoming a dumping ground for finished goods.”⁴⁰ But by July 2019, Buhari had been persuaded to sign the pact, along with neighboring Benin.⁴¹ Chinese commentators hailed the agreement and saw opportunities for Chinese companies. One article in the *Global Times* noted that “the AfCFTA has also created new development oppor-

tunities for Chinese companies to participate in the China–Africa economic and trade cooperation. . . . Chinese companies may consider increasing investment in such fields as manufacturing, e-commerce, and transportation infrastructure.”⁴²

China has become a major investor in Nigeria, but primary sector for such investment is transportation rather than petroleum. A variety of investment agreements were signed during Hu Jintao’s 2006 visit to Nigeria, and during later visits, covering oil and gas, power generation, telecommunications, railways, agriculture, manufacturing, and finance.⁴³

Some of the projects negotiated by Hu Jintao were curtailed by Obasanjo’s successor, Pres. Umaru Musa Yar’Adua, but President Jonathan negotiated others, as has his successor President Buhari. Thus, China is also building several high profile projects, many financed by China’s ExIm Bank. Upgrades and a second runway at Nnamdi Azikiwe International Airport will be the capital city’s new airport, a USD 200 million project negotiated in 2012, though delayed. The Ajakuta–Kaduna–Kano gas pipeline is being built in cooperation with Nigerian companies, with a preliminary deal signed in late 2018. The Sagamu Independent Power Plant will be a 400-megawatt gas-fueled powerplant to be built in Ogun state, near Lagos, that could increase Nigeria’s electricity by 10 percent for the cost of USD 550 million, as contracted in February 2018. And the Lekki Port will be a deepwater container port facility that will increase the Lagos area’s shipping capacity and be located at the Lekki Free Trade Zone (see below).⁴⁴

China has an advantage in infrastructure contracting in these areas, given the immense investment in domestic infrastructure in recent years and the stark contrast between China’s gleaming new urban subways, airports, and train stations with the aging equivalents in the United States.⁴⁵ At the same time, there are challenges for Chinese engineering firms, as Li Wentao and Sun Hong point out:

The international contracting market in Africa is becoming saturated as well. African countries under mounting pressure, like Nigeria, Ethiopia and Angola, have imposed more rigorous market access conditions for foreign investors. . . . Chinese companies felt a certain degree of discomfort in the face of these new circumstances. Take the engineering contract sector for example. Chinese companies have to shift from the conventional EPC (Engineering Procurement and Construction) model to BOT (Build, Operate, Transfer) or PPP (Public-Private Partnership) models. However, this transformation requires higher capabilities to deal with market risks, localization, etc. which so happen to be the weaker points of Chinese companies.⁴⁶

The biggest Chinese projects in Nigeria are railroads—to be built in stages—that will replace some of the old, poorly maintained colonial-era narrow-gauge routes with faster, higher-capacity, standard-gauge railways. The idea of new rail-

ways in Nigeria dates to 2002, when President Obasanjo undertook a 25-year strategic vision, which was revised in 2012.⁴⁷ The main contractor is China Civil and Engineering Construction Company (CCECC), a business affiliated with China's railway ministry. The first project was to have been the Lagos–Kano route, contracted in 2006 but revised due to Nigerian finance difficulties. The Chinese firm was then contracted to the single-line Abuja–Kaduna route, which broke ground in 2011 and was completed in 2014 at a cost of USD 1.2 billion. The next project is the Lagos–Ibadan segment, a project awarded in 2014. Connecting Kano to Kaduna would be next, though the project is still under negotiation.⁴⁸ Another major standard-gauge project would be an east–west linkage from Calabar to Lagos. This USD 3.5 billion project will start at the Calabar to Port Harcourt segment, though financing is apparently still uncertain.⁴⁹

The CCECC has also completed an urban light rail transit system, Abuja Metro, the first in West Africa. President Buhari formally opened the system in July 2018. The project was initially contracted in 2007 but delayed multiple times. The Lagos Metropolitan Area Transit Authority system is still developing slowly, with multiple changes of plans and contractors—one of them the CCECC for the Blue Line.

Petroleum is naturally where observers would expect to see a high level of Chinese involvement in Nigeria in the 1990s and 2000s. Figure 2 shows both the difficulty of Nigeria's oil production and the rise of a new petroleum giant in West Africa: Angola.

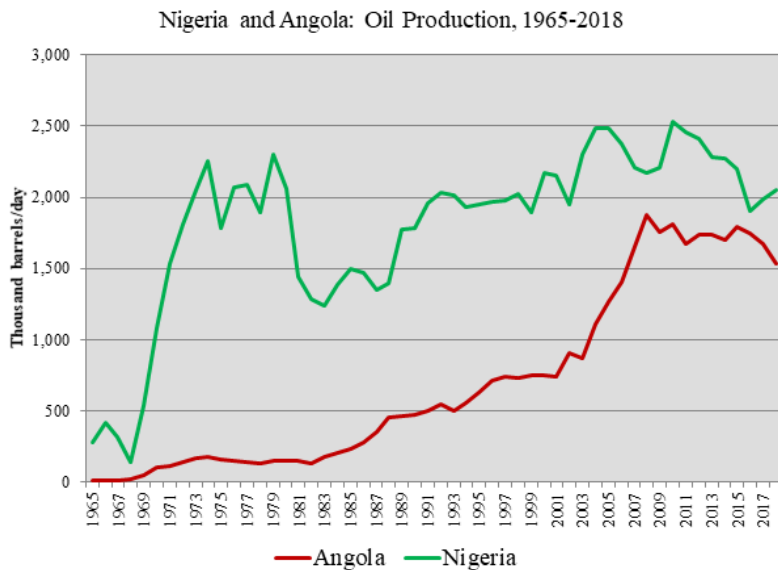


Figure 2. Nigerian and Angolan petroleum production, 1965–2018 (Source: BP 2019.)

Nigeria's oil sector already had substantial foreign investment in the early twenty-first century when China became involved, meaning that Beijing was largely shut out by firms such as Royal Dutch Shell, ExxonMobil, Chevron, Total, and Eni. However, in 2005, China's PetroChina (part of China National Petroleum Corporation [CNPC]), signed a USD 800 million contract for the supply of 30,000 barrels/day,⁵⁰ although that was a small fraction of Nigeria's 2005 production of 2.5 million barrels/day.⁵¹ Subsequent deals in 2006 involved China receiving exploration and development rights in exchange for repairing the Nigerian government's refinery at Kaduna.⁵² Some of these contracts were minority ownership, such as with South African Petroleum. Several of these deals, moreover, have not come to fruition, and unrest in the Niger Delta region has made investment and work there problematic.⁵³

Table 3 shows China's imports of Nigerian petroleum, with Angola as a comparison. The table illustrates the inconsistent flow of petroleum from Nigeria to China and the remarkable growth of Angolan exports to China. Overall, West Africa provided China with about 15 percent of its total oil imports in 2014—mostly from Angola.

Table 3. China: Imports of Nigerian, Angolan Petroleum, 1999–2015 (100 thousand tons)

Year	Nigeria	Angola
1999	13.692	28.760
2000	11.866	86.366
2001	7.725	37.989
2002	4.879	57.051
2003	1.220	101.015
2004	14.890	162.082
2005	13.102	174.628
2006	4.519	234.520
2007	8.951	249.966
2008	3.504	298.939
2009	13.932	321.725
2010	12.910	N/A
2011	10.658	N/A
2012	9.365	N/A
2013	10.524	N/A
2014	19.964	N/A
2015	6.586	N/A

Source: Liu Mingde and Wang Meng 2017, 71; Wang Feng 2010, 9.

Nigeria has the largest reserves of petroleum in Africa, and most of the quality of that petroleum is exceptionally high, low-sulfur light crude—ideal for gasoline refining. Given that China is now the largest automobile market in the world, why is Beijing not importing from and investing in Nigeria's petroleum sector? Again, several factors are at work. As mentioned earlier, China was late to the petroleum game in Nigeria, and as two Chinese analysts have stated, "The energy companies in Europe and the United States have basically monopolized the oil industry in Nigeria . . . which has squeezed the share of China's oil imports and caused more intense competition in energy projects than before."⁵⁴ Chinese oil majors (Sinopec, CNOOC, CNPC/中石化、中海油、中石油) only secured production rights in 2002 and obtained rights to fields in 2004 (Sinopec), and in 2006, CNOOC invested USD 2.7 billion in a 45-percent stake in the ML130 field (along with South African Petroleum). Also in 2006, Sinopec invested USD 2 billion for a 51-percent stake in the Kaduna refinery and various oil fields and blocks.⁵⁵ Production in those Chinese-linked fields varied substantially, however, and as table 3 shows, as China's overall crude petroleum imports from Nigeria varied as well. And compared to other purchasers of Nigerian crude, such as the United States (40 percent), India (11 percent), Brazil (10 percent), and Indonesia (7 percent), China's position in the market was still very small. In addition, Western oil majors quickly contracted the newly developing offshore blocks, leaving little for Chinese development.⁵⁶

The year 2009 was a difficult one for Nigeria (and much of the world) due to the global financial crisis. Ethnic and social issues in the Niger River delta region also made it very difficult for the oil corporations working there, with kidnappings of foreign petroleum personnel and a variety of rebel groups attacking facilities.⁵⁷ Chinese oil corporations continued investing, however, and Sinopec cut a 2009 deal to acquire the Canadian firm Addax Petroleum. A further deal for natural gas and the repair and management of another oil refinery was tentatively signed in June 2016.⁵⁸

The security situation in the Niger River delta improved for a brief while after a presidential pardon from Yar'Adua to the Niger Delta rebels groups in 2009, but attacks by other groups and gangs have led many Western oil corporations to withdraw personnel and investments in Nigeria. At first glance this might appear to be an opportunity for Beijing to increase China's share of Nigerian petroleum production/exports. However, Liu Mingde and Wang Meng point out that the same security issues that have caused Western companies to rethink their presence in Nigeria have posed of similar concern to Beijing. The authors conclude that all China can do is "look at the oil and sigh."⁵⁹

In addition, India has rapidly become Nigeria's number one customer for petroleum and indeed is now Nigeria's top export market, at over 45 percent of Nigeria's 2018 total of USD 43.6 billion. The United States remains second, and China is eighth with about 7.4 percent of Nigeria's exports.⁶⁰ Thus, China has a new competitor for influence in Nigeria, and Liu and Wang note that there is an inevitable element of competition for access to petroleum there, as well as a strategic competition, including India pushing for a permanent seat on the UNSC for Nigeria.⁶¹

Other forms of energy have seen periodic interest, but as with much business in Nigeria, keeping projects moving can be a challenge. A hydroelectric plant at Mambilla, on the Donga River (a tributary of the Benue River) has been in negotiations for years now among China Gezhouba Group, Sinohydro, and others. First interest was announced in April 2007, a contract signed in 2012, then canceled in 2013, and then construction announced in 2017 by China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation. That project—if it ever comes to fruition—would cost USD 5.9 billion (to be lent by China's ExIm Bank) but could increase Nigeria's electrical capacity by some 60 percent.⁶²

The total amount of Chinese investment in Nigeria, however, is difficult to determine precisely. Announcements, commitments, and contracts are often publicized, but capitalization can take years, if ever, to occur. Table 4 shows the calculation of the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies' China–Africa Research Initiative (SAIS–CARI), and the contrast with Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) in South Africa:

Table 4. China: FDI Stocks in Nigeria and South Africa, 2003–2017

Year	Total Stock: Nigeria (USD million)	Total Stock: South Africa (USD million)
2003	\$32	\$44.77
2004	\$76	\$58.87
2005	\$94	\$112.28
2006	\$216	\$167.62
2007	\$630	\$702.37
2008	\$796	\$3,048.62
2009	\$1,026	\$2,306.86
2010	\$1,211	\$4,152.98
2011	\$1,416	\$4,059.73
2012	\$1,950	\$4,775.07
2013	\$2,146	\$4,400.40
2014	\$2,323	\$5,954.02
2015	\$2,377	\$4,722.97
2016	\$2,542	\$6,500.84
2017	\$2,862	\$7,472.77

Source: SAIS-CARI 2019.

The data in table 4 show a modest level of investment in Nigeria from 2003 to 2009, then growth to more than USD 2.8 billion in 2017, which is appreciable though not dramatic. The contrast with China's investment in South Africa is noteworthy: China had an FDI position in South Africa over USD 7 billion in 2017, and Beijing's stock in South Africa has been higher than in Nigeria every year except 2006.⁶³ To be sure, South Africa had the larger economy until 2012, but even by the more conservative market exchange rate valuation of the World Bank World Development Indicators, China's FDI position in Nigeria does not match Nigeria's GDP position. Beijing also has FDI positions in Zambia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo greater than China's investments in Nigeria, even though these economies are much smaller than that of Nigeria. It is also worth noting that the IMF Coordinated Direct Investment Survey calculates that India has a greater FDI position in Nigeria than does China—USD 3.19 billion in 2017.

One reason that Chinese investment in Nigeria appears to be leveling out in recent years is the tightening control that the Central Bank of Nigeria has imposed during the sharp economic downturn in Nigeria in 2016. The effects on Chinese investors was summarized by Li Wentao and Sun Hong:

In the past two years, as a result of stagnating crude oil price and frequent rebel group attacks on oil production bases in the Niger River delta region, Nigerian oil output hit a record low and its foreign exchange reserves shrunk drastically to \$23.95 billion as of October 2016. The central bank fought back by strengthening regulations on capital outflows and on the foreign exchange market. The Nigerian naira lost nearly 50% of its value.... Consequently, all this made it much more difficult and costly for Chinese companies to exchange its [sic] revenue from local currency to more steady ones.⁶⁴

Free Trade Zones

Nigeria has hopes that free trade zones (FTZ) and special economic zones similar to those in Shenzhen, China, might jump start the manufacturing sector, as a Nigerian official involved in one of the zones announced hopefully "China owes its massive industrialisation to free trade zones scattered all over the country . . . more than a hundred zones of various kinds were established through China, which . . . are largely responsible for the remarkable growth of China over the years . . . there have been strong interests by many countries to emulate the model by adopting the Free Trade Zone as an economic policy."⁶⁵ China is involved in two such zones, the Lekki FTZ and the Ogun-Guangdong FTZ, both situated near Lagos. The former was announced in 2006 and the latter in 2011 (though discussions dated back to 2007).⁶⁶ China's Lekki announcement included a pledge to invest USD 267 million.⁶⁷ It is unclear how much investment has been sunk

into these ventures, but as of the time of this writing (July 2019), Nigerians still seemed keen on the idea.⁶⁸

Yunnan Chen and her teammates' research on the subject is perhaps the best examination of China's activities in these FTZs, based upon 2014–15 interviews. As might be expected, the progress in these zones has been mixed. Some Chinese businesses in these zones have thrived; others lasted only a few months. The Ogun-Guangdong zone has been growing faster than the Lekki zone, which has been plagued by “problems with land ownership around the zone [that] appeared to be an ongoing issue that has yet to be resolved by the Lagos government.”⁶⁹ Note that the “Lagos government” refers to Lagos state, not the federal government in Abuja. Still, there is an ongoing Chinese presence in these two FTZs and the Calabar FTZ as well. The motives for Chinese investors are diverse: “Chinese firms decide to invest in Nigeria for a variety of reasons, including lower costs, lower competition, and the country's large domestic market.”⁷⁰ Lack of competition seems particularly important, and many of the Chinese companies that begin operations in these FTZs have little or no background in the products they are making; they went into the line because there were no other products, making a seemingly profitable opportunity.⁷¹

Economic Relations: Nigerian Issues.

Given the trade and investment relationship between China and Nigeria, it is no surprise that there are a number of issues that have arisen. Thanks to the open media in Nigeria, such matters are often discussed. Industrial displacement, poor labor conditions, the shoddy quality of Chinese consumer goods, and intellectual property rights are the top four concerns.

Industrial Displacement

Nigeria has long practiced a high degree of protectionism, employing an assortment of mechanisms, such as tariffs, import licensing, customs procedures, and prohibitions.⁷² The World Trade Organization replaced the Multi-Fibre Arrangement of 1994, governing the world trade in textiles and garments, with the Agreement on Textiles and Clothing in 2004. This change led to a surge of foreign textile imports beginning in 2005 in particular and has contributed to the virtual disappearance of Nigeria's domestic textile industry. Some of these new imports are secondhand garments from Europe, but many are Chinese in origin. As of early 2005, Nigerian business leaders claimed 65 Nigerian textile mills had closed and 150,000 workers had lost their jobs.⁷³ In Kaduna and Kano, where modern textile manufacture began before independence, factories closed shop, and by

2012, most of the cloth in the Kantin Kwari textile market in Kano was Chinese.⁷⁴ In fact, Chinese and Nigerian traders smuggled some of these imports into Nigeria, along with other goods.⁷⁵ The Nigerian government had previously banned textile imports but lifted the prohibition in 2010.⁷⁶

The reaction to this industrial displacement in Nigeria has been mixed. Textile companies and workers naturally resent the development. As Elisha Renee recounts, “Not surprisingly, textile union leaders and retrenched textile workers are unhappy with mill closures in Kaduna and Kano, which they partly attribute to Nigerian textiles being undersold by the illegal importation of cheap, poor quality Chinese textiles through Nigeria’s porous borders even if they recognize the collusion of Nigerian traders in this process.” Yet, Nigerian cloth traders are happy with the situation, since they have cheaper goods and faster turnaround time for orders, despite the merchandise coming all the way from China.⁷⁷

Labor Practices

Labor practices are another source of complaint, especially the perception that Chinese construction firms use Chinese workers and not locally hired labor.⁷⁸ There is some research, however, that indicates that Chinese firms in Nigeria hire more than 84 percent of the local labor, though few of these employees are technical or managerial staff.⁷⁹ Conditions in Chinese-owned factories are also a source of complaint: “Chinese companies in Nigeria have been criticized for being ‘closed’ due to perceived low levels of employing local experts. There was even a submission that they sometimes maltreat their workers. According to some reports, the conditions of employment of Nigerians in certain Chinese firms conform neither to the Nigerian Labour Laws nor to that of the International Labour Organisation. This was highlighted when a number of Nigerian workers died after being trapped inside a locked Chinese-owned factory that caught fire in 2002.”⁸⁰

Shoddy Chinese Goods

Nigerian complaints of shoddy Chinese goods are one of the most common criticisms seen in Nigerian news media.⁸¹ The issue was serious enough in to be raised in bilateral talks in Beijing. According to the Nigerian account of the meeting, “Director General of the Standards Organization of Nigeria, John Akanya [said] it is worrisome to see sub-standard industrial goods being imported to Nigeria from China given the common knowledge that very high quality goods are being exported from China to other parts of the world including the United States and Europe....an average Nigerian believed every sub-standard product in Nigeria was from China.”⁸² And the Nigerian ambassador to China, Alhaji Aminu

Bashir Wali, told a Nigerian newspaper, “Responding to the influx of China’s inferior goods into the Nigerian market, Wali said this was another sad development facilitated by Nigerian businessmen, who came to China to make specifications for such inferior but profitable goods in the Nigerian market than the high quality Chinese products, that were in great demand in Europe, Asia and America.”⁸³ Chinese diplomats in 2015 had clearly heard the complaint frequently, and the Chinese Consul in Lagos noted, “I have worked in Nigeria for one year and answered the questions on quality issues from local media for several times.” The issue continued to be mentioned in the Nigerian media in 2015, and one particular passage from *This Day* about a meeting concerning UN Millennium Development Goals is worth quoting at length:

As regards quality of Chinese products, everyone admitted that China has the capacity to produce very qualitative goods. Mention was made of several Chinese exports of high quality products to many parts of Europe and America and questions were therefore raised as to why Nigeria should be the destination of inferior quality of goods. . . . The point was even made that Nigerians travel to China and collaborate with the Chinese to produce on the basis of some specifications. Thus it is more of collaboration of Nigeria’s criminals collaborating with their Chinese counterparts.⁸⁴

The quote is interesting because it holds that somehow Nigerians are getting worse quality Chinese products than the United States or Europe, not that Chinese goods are poor quality everywhere.⁸⁵ It also lays blame on Nigerian “criminals” traveling to China to obtain questionable goods. There is also informal trading (read as *smuggling*) across the borders with Nigeria’s neighbors, such as Benin and Cameroon. Exactly how much of this illicit trafficking is occurring is difficult to determine, but Kate Meagher estimates that if purely intra-African trade amounts to about 6 percent of total West African trade, then informal trade is about 4–5 percent.⁸⁶

Intellectual Property Rights

Finally, the issue of intellectual property rights comes up frequently. Nigerian textile traders often send their designs via smartphone camera to prospective manufacturing partners in China to solicit bids, only to find these unique designs show up elsewhere without approval.⁸⁷ This is noted in some of the Nigerian partners of Chinese companies in the FTZs and in a variety of other manufacturing ventures.⁸⁸

Economic Relations: Chinese Issues

Since the state and Communist Party tightly control Chinese media, the amount of complaints about business in Nigeria are carefully phrased and few. Most of the published complaints are the same that Nigerian businesses and government leaders discuss as the challenges of Nigeria: poor infrastructure, unreliable electricity, poor transportation, and an unstable security situation. Some additional issues that are unlikely to be noted in the official Chinese media are the cultural differences that make investment in Nigeria challenging. Interviews by Chen and her team summarize these issues:

Language and cultural differences remain barriers for this form of interpersonal skills transfer between Chinese and Nigerian staff. Many firms expressed frustration with the low education level of Nigerian workers, which made training a slow process. Many of the Chinese firms we interviewed also cited cultural differences in attitudes toward work as a challenge, namely the stark contrast between Chinese work culture and the relaxed attitude and time-management among local Nigerians, Lack of trust of Nigerian staff, and fear of losing sensitive business knowledge were also noted as obstacles to skills transfer.⁸⁹

Social Relations

Education

Beijing has placed great emphasis on the role of Confucius Institutes in China's outreach to foreign publics—its “soft power.” These are cooperative ventures with local colleges and universities that provide low-cost Chinese language and cultural instruction. Two have been founded in Nigeria: one at the University of Lagos and a second at Nnamdi Azikiwe University in Awka (near Onitsha), both founded in 2009. In contrast, there are six Confucius Institutes in South Africa, and 59 total across Africa.

Nigerians in China

As noted in the introduction, the presence of a large community of Nigerians in China, particularly in Guangzhou, is an unusual aspect of Sino–Nigerian relations. The issue was mentioned in the Nigerian media as recently as 2017, when the chair of the Nigerian House Committee on Nigeria–China relations, Yusuf Buba, said, “As lawmakers, we make sure that the interest of our businessmen who go to China to trade is protected and that we try to see how we will encourage the technology transfer from China to Nigeria so that . . . we will also become indus-

trialised as the Chinese people have become.”⁹⁰ The presence of a large Nigerian community in Guangzhou prompted pressure on the governments in Abuja and Beijing to open a consulate-general in that city.⁹¹ Speaking in 2014, one Nigerian businessman in China said, “Before the establishment of the consulate in Guangzhou there was a long gap between Nigerians in China and their home country. The connectivity between Guangzhou and Beijing, where the Nigeria embassy was first situated was a herculean experience. In many situations, we would commute about 21 hours journey by train from Guangzhou to Beijing . . . just to get embassy authorities consents for cases ranging from business registrations to minor consular services.”⁹² Complaints about the treatment of Nigerians in China were among the articles in Nigerian media. “As the presence of Nigerian immigrants continue to grow in the People’s Republic of China, many Nigerians have begun to demonstrate utmost displeasure towards the country’s public display of cultural barriers. Their major concern has been that the cultural barriers have in many diverse ways, contributed in dampening business relations between them and the Chinese.”⁹³

The Nigerian Consul-General of Guangzhou, Wale Oloko, noted a variety of complaints in 2018 during a meeting with the Nigerian community in Guangzhou. Currently, Chinese authorities charge a hefty fine for Nigerians living illegally in the country (USD 1,500) when they exit, thus discouraging them from leaving. Other complaints include targeted checks by the security bureau, refusal of hotels to accommodate Nigerians, freezing of bank accounts, residential prohibitions, and so forth.⁹⁴

The issue of Nigerians in China, however, has had a more complex treatment in the Nigerian media. The role of “Nigerian criminals” in importing counterfeit and shoddy goods was mentioned above. The Nigerian ambassador to China, Shola Onadipe, in 2014 and was quite critical of some Nigerians living in China:

. . . what you do you see in China, Nigerians, those who have overstayed for three, four, five six years, go and open shops, buying and selling. Most of them are not paying tax, most of them use fraudulent means to run the shops, and they say they don’t do retail, that they are only selling to their customers in Nigeria but that is not true. . . . A lot of them are notorious for nefarious activities with hard drugs. . . . There are many of them there [in Guangzhou] and with that notoriety about Nigerians, and you know they are very loud, they will be smoking marijuana openly in another man’s country, that is ridiculous. They drink heavily, they are notorious in that area.⁹⁵

The ambassador then differentiated the behavior of these Nigerians from other Africans in Guangzhou: “The Cote’Ivoire [sic] people, the Ghanaians, Camerou-

nians, the French speaking countries, they have their own sector [in Guangzhou], the police don't go there to harass them."⁹⁶

One is struck by this statement; ambassadors are usually diplomatic and even-handed in their advocacy for their own citizens. Of course, this could simply be an ambassador (who was scheduled to retire) who had simply had his fill of frustrating citizens' consular problems and misbehaving nationals. The other possibility is an unspoken differentiation between various Nigerians. The ambassador's name would indicate he comes from southwest Nigeria. Many of the Nigerians who live in China and elsewhere are part of the broader Igbo diaspora from eastern Nigeria and neighboring Cameroon.⁹⁷ Igbo speakers comprise the largest linguistic group among the Africans in Guangzhou.⁹⁸ It is impossible to know whether this is a factor prompting the ambassador's reaction, but ethnic tensions were the primary cause of the Nigerian civil war (1966–69) and a neo-Biafran independence movement that began in the twenty-first century has led to recent military action by the Nigerian government.⁹⁹ In November 2018, the Nigerian Consul General in Guangzhou "called on the Nigerians in China to remain law abiding and shun acts that would have negative impact of the Nigeria of Nigeria" and the president of the association of the Nigerian Community in China "admitted that some members of the community are on the other side of the law and urged them to retrace their steps before it is too late as the Chinese authorities have zero tolerance for criminal activities, especially drug trafficking."¹⁰⁰

Beginning in 2014, the Guangzhou Public Security Bureau (police) began to crack down on foreigners' misbehavior in general and Nigerians in particular, at least in the view of many Nigerian residents in Guangzhou. One Chinese estimate of the number of Africans in Guangzhou at the beginning of the year was 15,000 to 20,000.¹⁰¹ Some estimates of the number remaining at the end of the year are around 4,000. The police crackdown was directed against foreigners engaged in the "three illegals"—三非/*san fei*—illegal residence, illegal employment, and illegally overstaying visas. Technically, this could be enforced against any foreigner in China, but Africans feel they are particularly targeted in this drive.¹⁰²

It is interesting to note that a slight easing of visa restrictions on Nigerians coming to China may be coming following an announcement by Chu Maoming, Consul General of China in Lagos, who said that "within the framework of the agreement on the Belt and Road Initiative signed between Presidents Muhammadu Buhari and Xi Jinping, there would be more business and trade transaction between China and Nigeria. 'We do know that more Nigerians would be traveling to China, and more of Chinese businesses and investments coming to Nigeria. We therefore know that the need to provide more Nigerians with visas is very important. What we want Nigerians to know is that the process for applying for

the Chinese visas is one of the fastest and most convenient.”¹⁰³ The implication is that since Nigeria publicly signed on to the BRI, it would get more visas.

Chinese in Nigeria

The flip side of the equation—Chinese in Nigeria—is more difficult to assess. Different sources estimate the number of such individuals between 5,000 and 11,000 or more. The number of contract workers on various projects is listed in 2017 as a bit over 10,000.¹⁰⁴ Renne notes calculations of 50,000 Chinese traders in Nigeria, with 30,000 resident in Lagos.¹⁰⁵ Very little systematic research has been done on Chinese in Nigeria, for a variety of reasons such as language barriers and the reluctance of Chinese to be interviewed. An extremely small sampling did reveal that both communities [Chinese and Nigerians] have overall positive impressions of each other. The Chinese sample, although small, showed six out of seven respondents had positive relations with the Nigerian community in Lagos, and positive to neutral relationships with Nigerian business people . . . with their Nigerian customers. . . . Not surprisingly, Chinese businesspeople complained about the same infrastructural and security problems that irritate Nigerians . . . electrical power supplies, transportation woes, including traffic jams.”¹⁰⁶

China-in-Africa: Views from Nigeria

Given all this history of interactions, how do Nigerians feel about China? Here we are fortunate, because public opinion polling has been tracking this issue for several years. Table 5 shows the results:

Table 5. Nigerian public opinion of China, 2006–2018

Year	Pew Positive	Pew Negative	BBC Positive	BBC Negative	Gallup Positive	Gallup Negative	AfroBarometer Positive	AfroBarometer Negative
2006			68%	-11%				
2007	75%	-18%						
2008	79%	-14%					86%	-14%
2009	85%	-10%	72%	-15%				
2010	76%	-15%						
2011			85%	-9%	64%	-17%		
2012			89%	-7%	66%	-14%		
2013	76%	-11%	85%	-10%				
2014	70%	-14%					67%	-7%
2015	70%	-14%						
2016	63%	-18%						
2017	72%	-13%	83%	-9%				
2018	61%	-17%						

Sources: Pew Global Indicators Database 2019; BBC 2006–2017; Clifton (Gallup) 2011, 2012; and Gadzala and Hanusch 2010 (AfroBarometer 2008).¹⁰⁷

Pew and the *BBC* are the most frequent in their surveys, and Gallup and AfroBarometer much less so. Nevertheless, with four different sources (and different questions), the results are remarkably similar: China is very popular in Nigerian public opinion. There is variation, higher in 2009 but lower in 2016, but the numbers are still remarkably high throughout.

The Pew and *BBC* surveys have the advantage of frequency, with the former conducted in 10 out of the last 13 years. The *BBC* did so in six out of 13 years, so we can venture statements about the longer-term impression that China has left on Nigeria. Of course, there is variation over time: the 2008 Beijing Olympics does appear to have a noticeable improvement in China's image in Nigeria in 2009. In 2016 and 2018 in the Pew survey, China's approval dropped below 70 percent for the first time. *BBC* surveying is less frequent but does show more consistency since 2011. Naturally, we look for comparative context for this question, and the numbers for other foreign subjects and the parallel number for other West African states are suggestive. First, Nigerian positivity about China is not unique; survey numbers out of Pew and the *BBC* show Nigerians also like the United States. For Americans (and to an extent Pew analysts) there is a sense of a zero-sum popularity game between Washington and Beijing, but there is no necessary link between the two. In 2018, for example, Nigerians gave the United States a 62-percent approval rating, statistically no different from the Chinese rating, and high ratings in 2016, 2014, and especially in 2010.¹⁰⁸ And lest we assume that Nigerians simply like everyone, the Pew survey has included questions about favorability toward Russia, and these show substantially lower numbers in the low 40s and high 30s range.

The *BBC* surveys cover fewer years but more subject countries. These numbers largely reinforce the impression found in the Pew data that China is popular among Nigerians, and generally with even higher favorables and fewer unfavorables toward China than the Pew data indicates, admittedly with a different question. Nigerian views of Russia is almost exactly the same as reported in Pew, and views of Pakistan and Iran for example, being very negative. Views of India, an increasingly important economic partner for Nigeria—and competitor for China—score lower in Nigeria than China by almost 40 points, with only 47 percent perceiving India as a “mainly positive influence in the world” versus 83 percent for China. The Gallup polls have had limited work in Africa regarding China, and few of their data are publicly available. The two years available do correlate somewhat with Pew data, though the polls were taken in different years.

All these surveys reveal a fairly consistent message: Nigerians have generally favorable opinions of China. However, these surveys do not reveal *why* Nigerians hold those opinions. This is where the last survey research unit noted in table 6,

the AfroBarometer, is most useful. This is an academic initiative, and far more questions are asked of respondents. The 2014/15 Survey asked specifically what made for a positive image of China among African respondents, in this case Nigeria. Table 6 shows the results:

Table 6. AfroBarometer Reasons for Positive Image of China in Nigeria, 2014/15

Reason	Percentage
None of these	1.20%
China's support for the country in international affairs	10.10%
Non-interference in the internal affairs of African countries	5.90%
China's investment in infrastructure in the country	18.50%
China's business investment	28.20%
The quality or cost of Chinese products	21.70%
An appreciation of the Chinese people, culture and language	1.60%
Some other factor	0.50%
Don't know	12.30%

Source: AfroBarometer, 2014/15 Survey.

The data indicate that the commercial relationship is clearly the top reason for Nigerians' high regard for China. It also shows that China's investment in cultural exchanges has very little effect. In short, the findings confirm what some Western critics—including Joseph Nye, the inventor of the term—have said: China is weak on *soft power*.¹⁰⁹ Investment, infrastructure, and inexpensive products are why Nigerians have positive feelings toward China.

Similarly, the AfroBarometer asked about the reasons for Nigerians' negative views of China. Table 7 shows these results:

Table 7. AfroBarometer Reasons for Negative Image of China in Nigeria, 2014/15

Reason	Percentage
None of these	5.90%
China's extraction of resources from Africa	9.50%
Land grabbing by Chinese individuals or businesses	4.60%
China's willingness to cooperate with undemocratic rulers	8.40%
Taking jobs or business from the locals	10.50%
The quality of Chinese products	37.30%
The behavior of Chinese citizens in the country	4.80%
Some other factor	1.40%
Don't know	17.70%

Source: AfroBarometer, 2014/15 Survey.

The leading issue for negative images of China is one already discussed: the quality of Chinese goods; this represents the flip side of their low cost, and reminds us that the foremost ambassador of China in Nigeria are products, not people.

Nigerian Media

The Nigerian media are diverse, and their treatment of China's involvement in Nigeria is difficult to characterize simply. Nigeria has a vibrant media sector, characterized by a large number of newspapers easily available to researchers and a willingness to be criticize the government and its policies, which stretches back to the periods of military rule (1966–79 and 1983–99).¹¹⁰ It would be fair to say that as with most newspapers around the world, Nigerian publishers are always looking for copy, and a fair number of articles are lightly edited transcripts of official Chinese statements from visiting officials, diplomats, or consuls in Abuja or Lagos or from Nigerian diplomats in Beijing or their consulates-general in Guangzhou and Shanghai. Not surprisingly, these statements are very diplomatic, such as the statement by the newly appointed Nigerian ambassador to China: "China today is our most important partner and has been supporting Nigeria and indeed Africa in our development stride."¹¹¹ The Chinese ambassador to Nigeria, Gu Xiaojie, wrote in anticipation of President Buhari's visit to China the usual sort of praise for bilateral relations, which was published as an opinion piece in many Nigerian papers: "Distance cannot separate true friends who feel so close even when they are thousands of miles apart. The China–Nigeria friendship has stood the test of time and became stronger and more vigorous despite the vast oceans between the two countries."¹¹²

The Nigerian press new also critically examined the Chinese-built African Union headquarters in Ethiopia. Nigerians seemed to hold conflicting positions about the project, as spelled out by *Vanguard*:

The \$200 Million New Headquarters of the African Union a gift from China—is another confirmation of the continent's inability to get things done by itself. Almost 50 years after the formation of the Organisation of African Unity, OAU, the AU's forebear, the continent could not afford the AU's new edifice that has cast a permanent role for China in Africa. . . . Critics of the project, mostly from the West, warn Africa of the consequences of permitting so much Chinese influence in the continent, but they could be jealous of losing their rights to exploit Africa, the same accusation they make against China. . . . None of those critics could build that structure without killing conditions attached to it.¹¹³

Conclusion: Sino–Nigeria Relations—Why So Little So Late?

What, then, can we make of relations between Nigeria and China? Until the 2010s, the relationship was good and growing, but less than one might expect given the size and importance of the two actors—like two giants watching each other from a distance with the occasional friendly wave but not much more. Why was this relationship stalled for so long, and why has the last decade changed so much?

One fundamental factor that is unalterable is the geography. Though both are in the northern hemisphere, these two countries are nearly antipodes, and that truth eliminates the normal bases for long-term relations, namely neighboring and proximity. Neighboring countries have deep and complex relationships, long histories of amity and enmity, and traditional border trade going back centuries. There are traditional rivalries between states that make for alliances and partnerships, such as between China and Pakistan—a case prompted by their common rival, India.

China and Nigeria have none of that geographic advantage, so it is not surprising that their relationship started at a disadvantage. However, unlike Tanzania and Zambia, which established a solid and enduring relationship with China beginning in the 1960s, Nigeria's and China's stances on the Nigerian and Angolan civil wars soured their relations and left them formalistic until the 1980s. Furthermore, neither country particularly needed the other for much of the 1960s–1990s; China was self-sufficient in petroleum, and Nigeria hoped to develop its own light industrial products which China could export during the period. To be sure, both voted in line with the G-77 at the United Nations and had diplomatic relations, but not much of a relationship beyond that.

The Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989 in China and the execution of writer, producer, and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa in 1995 in Nigeria made both countries anathema to the international community. In Africa, South Africa, under Nelson Mandela, became the star in 1994, and Pretoria established informal ties with Beijing and, in late 1996, announced it would recognize Beijing in 1998, further isolating Nigeria. After the democratization of Nigeria in 1999, the diplomatic relations began to gel between Abuja and Beijing. Presidents Obasanjo and Hu exchanged visits and a number of agreements were reached in 2006. Once again, however, circumstances conspired to set the relationship back. Newly elected President Yar'Adua was much more skeptical of the grandiose plans reached, and many projects were canceled or delayed. Yar'Adua's illness and the ambiguity of who was in charge in Nigeria between November 2009 and May 2010 further stalled Nigerian foreign relations in general. After Goodluck Jonathan assumed the full powers of the presidency in May 2010, relations between Nigeria and

China gained momentum again. However, many fundamental problems remained; Boko Haram was expanding in the north, and the government in Abuja showed little concern. The Niger Delta rebellions did receive more attention, but peace remained elusive. Additionally, China remained shut out of Nigeria's fluctuating oil production, and turned to Angola for petroleum instead. Another rival—South Africa—continued to receive more attention from China and the world.

It was in the 2010s that Sino–Nigerian relations began to blossom, especially in trade and construction. However, the relationship continues to experience starts and stops. Some of this is the result of frequent changes in administrations in Nigeria, with the Obasanjo, Jonathan, and Buhari administrations having demonstrated much more interest in cooperation than the Yar'Adua administration. The intense recession in Nigeria in 2016 also slowed down progress in large-scale deals between Abuja and Beijing. By 2018, however, the Buhari administration seemed committed to working with Beijing on China's grandiose BRI. Alternatives from the West have been lacking. In early 2018, the Trump administration made it clear that sub-Saharan African countries do not factor highly in America's current foreign policy calculus. As a result, China may be the only partner left for Nigeria.

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think each of the following countries is having a mainly positive or mainly negative influence in the world?” AfroBarometer question: “In your opinion, how much do each of the following do to help your country, or haven’t you heard enough to say: China?” (2014): “In general, do you think that China’s economic and political influence on [Nigeria] is mostly positive, or mostly negative, or haven’t you heard enough to say?” Gallup question: “Do you approve or disapprove of the job performance of the leadership of China?”

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