

Oscar M. Otele

What Explains African Perceptions of China as a Model of Development?

Dr Oscar M. Otele

*Senior Lecturer with the Department of Political Science and
Public Administration at the University of Nairobi and Mega-
trends Afrika Fellow 2022 at the Kiel Institute for the World
Economy
Otele@uonbi.ac.ke*

Executive Summary

In light of China's growing global influence, it is a much-debated question whether developing countries could follow 'China's model' of development. In this context, understanding how the model is perceived becomes critical for policymakers because, as African states continue to democratize, state interests may be driven by popular perceptions. Using Afrobarometer survey data, this paper utilises multivariate logit models to account for the differences in perceptions among countries. The paper establishes that education, gender, the rural-urban divide and respondent's perceptions of the influence of China's economic activities on the country's economy accounted for the differences. Although Beijing's recent policy pronouncements suggest that it is determined to promote urbanisation, improve education and reduce inequality in Africa, if China is covertly promoting its own development experience in Africa, the results may be mixed as the choice of China as a model is stronger in some countries than in others.

Content

Introduction	1
Global Perspectives on Citizens' Perception of China	3
African Perspectives on Citizens' Perceptions of China	4
Afrobarometer Round Eight Surveys	6
Which Development Models Do Africans Prefer?	7
Multivariate Analysis	10
Discussion and Policy Implications	13
Appendices	15
<i>Appendix A: Variables Recording</i>	15
<i>Appendix B: Estimated Multivariate Logit Models without Country Fixed Effects</i>	16
<i>Appendix C: Estimated Multivariate Logit Models with Country Fixed Effect</i>	17

Introduction

Recent Chinese policy adjustment in Africa, especially in the context of the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) since 2013, and Beijing's gradual interest in peace and security raises the question of how China's approach to development is perceived in Africa. Since 2013, President Xi Jinping's BRI has occupied a pivotal role in China-Africa relations. In May 2017, China organised the first BRI forum in Beijing, which Ethiopia's Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn and Kenya's President Uhuru Kenyatta attended. At the forum, Desalegn observed that "we continue to view China as a successful economic model and reliable ally in the fight against poverty and in the quest for prosperity", while Kenyatta discussed projects with Chinese Premier Li Keqiang.¹ BRI projects have emerged across the continent, with the transport sector being the largest beneficiary, followed by the energy and power sector, real estate, and mining.² According to *Xinhua*, as of 2019, China has been engaged in about 200 infrastructure projects in Africa, and further completing or nearing to complete projects designed to upgrade highways, railways, ports, water treatment plants and power generation machines and transmission lines.³ As of January 2021, 85 per cent of African states had signed BRI-related cooperation agreements with China.⁴

In addition, since 2003, China has been championing the view that development is a prerequisite for peace and security.⁵ The development-security nexus became a discourse in China-Africa relations when the FOCAC Action Plan officially adopted a peace and security component. At the 2015 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in Johannesburg, President Xi Jinping observed that "development holds the key to solving all problems".⁶ This sentiment has been reinforced by Chinese policymakers at the United Nations (UN) General Assembly. For example, in 2019, China's Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, affirmed that development is a panacea to all problems, promising that China "would actively explore and apply a Chinese approach to addressing hotspot issues and play a constructive role in upholding international peace and security".⁷

This policy adjustment goes hand in hand with China's growing global influence, especially in developing countries, which is often framed within broader discussions on whether developing countries can follow China's approach to development that some scholars have termed "China model".⁸ Although the term is generally linked to state-led policy planning, it remains essentially contested among scholars and policy makers. Rooted in Joshua Ramo's 2004 publication on the "*Beijing Consensus*", initially, the debates centred on economic development, but have since spread to China's political system.⁹ The debates have altered how "China's model" is perceived globally.

¹ Mariama Sow, "Africa in the News: African leaders attend China's Belt and Road Summit", *Brookings Africa in Focus*, 19 May 2023.

² Hannah Edinger and Jean-Pierre Labuschagne, "If You Want to Prosper, Consider Building Roads", *Deloitte Insight*, 22 March 2019.

³ "China, Botswana sign MoU on BRI Cooperation", editorial, *Xinhua*, 08 January 2021.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), Forum on China-Africa Cooperation-Addis Ababa Action Plan (2004-2006), 2003.

⁶ Speech by President Xi Jinping on FOCAC at the Opening Ceremony of the Johannesburg Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, 4 December 2015.

⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, Wang Yi: We Will Actively Explore and Apply a Chinese Approach to Addressing Hotspot Issues, 28 September 2019.

⁸ Suisheng Zhao, "The China Model: can it replace the Western model of modernization?" *Journal of Contemporary China* 19, 65 (2010): 419-436.

⁹ Joshua Cooper Ramo, *The Beijing consensus* (London: Foreign Policy Centre, 2004).

Despite the lack of consensus on what the “China model” is, analyses revolve around three themes: First, much scholarly effort has been spent on interpreting China’s model. This discussion has taken an ideological undertone with China’s economic growth often contrasted to the US, for instance in terms of innovation-based development, equitable and sustainable development and a strong element of self-determination.¹⁰ Other scholars have focused on China’s political economy. Yang Yao, for instance, looks at the economic reforms in exports and foreign direct investment.¹¹ Still, some scholars focus on China’s political system, centering on the role of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the country’s development.¹²

The second theme focuses on the origin and ramifications of the “China model”. In the context of Chinese responses to the global financial crisis of 2008/2009, the Chinese model was hailed as a possible alternative to the US-led ‘Washington Consensus’. In Asia, China’s successful response to the financial crises in 1997 and 2008/2009 reinforced its attractiveness in the region.¹³ Some scholars focus on different facets of China’s development path, from societal transformation to decentralisation. According to Dali Yang, the Chinese government’s response to social tensions and class conflict are important factors explaining China’s successful development path.¹⁴ Other scholars focus on the adaptability of political institutions in China’s development path, especially the role of the CCP in economic policy.¹⁵

The third theme focuses on the exportation of China’s model to other parts of the developing world. In Africa, for example, the China model is often associated with the extraction of natural resources.¹⁶ Still in the same region, some scholars have looked at how African political elites apply the China model as a rhetoric device “in line with their own idiosyncratic strategic and political purposes, in relation to specific material conditions and social contexts”.¹⁷ Given that developing economies have different contexts, it has been argued that the China model may not be easily transferred abroad. Instead, these economies should strive to come up with a ‘home-grown model’.¹⁸

Going beyond this academic debate Bridget Welsh and Alex Chang have noted that ordinary citizens are often not aware of these interpretations of the China model and therefore the views of citizens are always not reflected in most of the discussions about the Chinese model.¹⁹ Consequently, an analysis of citizens’ perception of China is important for two reasons. First, international politics are not restricted to the level of elites. It may also be shaped by individuals and other non-state actors. Second, as African states continue to democratize²⁰, state interests may be driven increasingly by popular perceptions.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Yang Yao, “The China model and its future”, in *China: The Next Twenty Years of Reform and Development*, ed. Ross Garnaut, Jane Golley, and Ligang Song (Canberra: The ANU Press, 2020).

¹² Naazneen Barma and Ely Ratner. “China’s illiberal challenge”, *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas* 2, Fall (2006): 56-68.

¹³ Baocheng Ji, “China’s economic recovery and the China model” *Journal of Chinese Economic and Business Studies* 8, 3 (2020): 215-226.

¹⁴ Dali L. Yang, “Economic transformation and its political discontents in China: Authoritarianism, Unequal Growth, and the Dilemmas of Political Development” *Annual Review of Political Science* 9, (2006): 143-164.

¹⁵ Ann Florini, Hairong Lai, and Yeling Tan, *China Experiments: From Local Innovations to National Reform* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2012).

¹⁶ See, Martyn Davies, “China’s Developmental Model Comes to Africa”, *Review of African Political Economy* 35, 115 (2008): 134-137.

¹⁷ Obert Hodzi and John H.S. Åberg, “Introduction to the Special Issue: Strategic deployment of the China model in Africa”, *Politics & Policy* 48, 5 (2020), 808.

¹⁸ Abel A. Kinyondo, “Does Tanzania’s Development Trajectory Borrow from the China Model?”, *Politics & Policy* 48, 5 (2020): 960-987.

¹⁹ Bridget Welsh and Alex Chang, “Choosing China: public perceptions of ‘China as a model’”, *Journal of Contemporary China* 24, 93 (2015): 442-456.

²⁰ Daniel Large, *China and Africa: The New Era* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2021).

Therefore, understanding how ordinary citizens perceive China's role is relevant to understanding how African countries may respond to the Chinese influence in the future.

Global Perspectives on Citizens' Perception of China

The Pew Research Centre, the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and the Asian Barometer have conducted surveys of citizens' perceptions of China. As early as 2005, the Pew Global Attitudes Project examined citizens' perceptions of China in more than 24 countries. Generally, the results indicated a favorable outlook towards China. For example, a majority of citizens interviewed in sampled Asian countries perceived China's economic growth as beneficial, with the exception of Japan.²¹ The generally favorable assessment of China was largely consistent with surveys conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs in 2006 which asked citizens in Asia and other countries about their views on China and Beijing's role in solving key problems in Asia. The dominant view was that Asians (including Indians and South Koreans) held positive beliefs about China and its ability to solving key regional problems.²²

John Aldrich and Jie Lu examined how the public in the US, Latin America and East Asia perceived an emerging China.²³ In 2010 and 2012 surveys, respondents were asked how they felt toward China and how that compared to other countries. The two surveys consistently indicated that China was "slightly negatively assessed"²⁴, and on average it followed Japan, India and Russia in terms of the positive rating. In Latin American and Caribbean societies such as Jamaica, Costa Rica, Venezuela, Guyana and the Dominican Republic, more than half of the respondents rated the Chinese influence as positive. However, only about two-fifths of the respondents in Chile, Uruguay, Mexico, Argentina, Guatemala, and Bolivia reported favorable views of China. East Asia generally reported favorable opinion about China as a model. In another survey in East Asia, half of all respondents in Singapore, Cambodia, the Philippines, and Malaysia said that China was a force for good in the region, while two-fifths of respondents in Thailand, Mongolia, Vietnam and Japan said they had a favorable view of China. Still in Asia, some studies focus on specific factors that influence citizens' perception of China. Yida Zhai examined how youths in South Korea, Vietnam, Thailand, the Philippines, Singapore, Japan and Taiwan view a rising China. Apart from Thailand, youths in other Asian societies have a more negative evaluation of it as a model.²⁵ Still, in East Asia, Bridget Welsh and Alex Chang found that political culture influences how citizens perceive China as a model, though there were countries where there was no link between political attitudes and perceptions of China as a model.²⁶ Women were less likely to consider China as a model, the more educated were less likely to prefer China as a model while the rural-urban divide is not significant in this regard.²⁷ East Asians that did not

²¹ Pew Research Center, *American Character Gets Mixed Reviews* (Washington D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2005); "Publics of Asian Powers Hold Negative Views of One Another", *Pew Research Center Report*, 21 September 2008; "Global Economic Gloom - China and India Notable Exceptions", *Pew Research Center Report*, 12 June 2008.

²² The Chicago Council of Global Affairs, *The United States and the Rise of China and India* (Chicago: The Chicago Council of Global Affairs, 2006).

²³ John H. Aldrich and Jie Lu, "How the public in the US, Latin America, and East Asia sees an emerging China", *European Review* 23, 2 (2015): 227-241.

²⁴ Aldrich and Lu, "How the public in the US, Latin America, and East Asia sees an emerging China", 231.

²⁵ Yida Zhai, "A Peaceful Prospect or a Threat to Global Order: How Asian Youth View a Rising China", *International Studies Review* 21, 1 (2019): 38-56.

²⁶ Welsh and Chang, "Choosing China: public perceptions of 'China as a model'".

²⁷ *Ibid.*

perceive China as having any influence in their own country were less likely to perceive China as a model.²⁸

African Perspectives on Citizens' Perceptions of China

African perceptions of China's presence in Africa have also been scrutinised. Using Afrobarometer survey data from 20 countries Marek Hanusch examined the effects of Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI), China-Africa trade links and the country influence on democracy on African perceptions of China's engagement in Africa. According to the study, Africans perceive Chinese engagement on their continent not much differently than initiatives driven by Western countries. China was perceived slightly less positively "than the former colonial powers or the US, but significantly more so than African powerhouses, such as South Africa or Nigeria".²⁹ Fei-Ling Wang and Esi Elliot examined perceptions of China in eight African countries (Botswana, Ghana, Kenya, Madagascar, Namibia, Tanzania, South Africa and Zimbabwe).³⁰ The study found that China is generally viewed as a beneficial partner contributing positively to the economic development of many host states.

However, there were complaints about the opportunistic and predatory behavior of Chinese actors comparable to the older Western resource extractions tendencies. Afrobarometer Round Six's surveys data found that 30 per cent of the respondents cited the US as the best model of development followed by China with 24 percent. 13 per cent of the respondents picked their former colonial masters followed by South Africa at 11 percent.³¹ Selection of the US and China as development models was higher among citizens with at least a secondary-school education than among respondents with no formal education. Slightly more men than women preferred China as a model. Urban-rural differences were small, with urban residents leaning more toward the United States and China. Ageing population were somewhat less likely to see the US and China as models.

Building on this data, in the case of Tanzania, Stephen Mwombela found that China's economic and political influence is perceived mostly positive and viewed as having more influence on Tanzania than the UK, US, India, South Africa, the World Bank or UN.³² Investment in infrastructure and affordable Chinese products were cited as factors that contributed to a positive image, while the presence of Chinese workers on infrastructure projects and the low quality of Chinese products were associated with a more negative outlook.³³

Targeting political and administrative elites, Elsje Fourie explored the extent to which the development experience of China is viewed as a model by Ethiopia and Kenyan elites. In Ethiopia, elites consciously emulated some aspects of China's perceived development successes,³⁴ while Kenyan elites were more likely to look up to Singapore and Malaysia as development models for the design of the Kenya Vision 2030 - the country's development

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Marek Hanusch, "African perspectives on China-Africa: Modelling popular perceptions and their economic and political determinants", *Oxford Development Studies* 40, 4 (2012), 509.

³⁰ Fei-Ling Wang and Esi A. Elliot, "China in Africa: presence, perceptions and prospects", *Journal of Contemporary China* 23, 90 (2014): 1012-1032.

³¹ Mogopodi Lekorwe, Anyway Chingwete, Mina Okuru, and Romaric Samson, *China's growing presence in Africa wins largely positive popular reviews*, Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 122 (Accra: Afrobarometer, 2016).

³² Research on Poverty Alleviation (REPOA) Policy Research for Development, "Chinese Engagement in Tanzania: Is it Considered Positive or Negative by Tanzanians? Findings from the Afrobarometer Round 6 Survey in Tanzania", Media Briefing, 25 February 2015.

³³ Lekorwe, Chingwete, Okuru, and Samson. *China's growing presence in Africa wins largely positive popular reviews*.

³⁴ Elsje Fourie, "China's example for Meles' Ethiopia: when development 'models' land", *Journal of Modern African Studies* 53, 3 (2015): 289-316.

blueprint.³⁵ A recent study by Josephine Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny and Edem Selormey found that respondents perceived China as the second best model for development after the US, even though a majority of citizens familiar with Chinese development assistance were concerned about high levels of debt in their countries.³⁶

While the above studies have shed light on citizens' perceptions of China, there are several clear gaps and shortcomings that this paper intends to address. First, there is little discussion of the specific factors that shape perceptions, thereby undermining the ability to interpret the general pattern effectively. For example, China has implemented several infrastructure projects in some countries such as Angola, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe and Kenya. Do citizens still see the repair of roads, railways and ports as a major priority? This aspect is important because the perception of infrastructure development as a major priority may influence the view of whether China is a model or not. This paper addresses these issues using survey data from Afrobarometer Round Eight (2019/2020), where the question of China's model was last asked and offers a multi-level analysis of the national and individual factors that shape African perceptions of China's model. The paper will consider three sets of hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1: *Respondents who perceived their governments as prioritizing their citizens' concerns (economic, food/agriculture, infrastructure, government service, health and governance issues) are less likely to choose alternatives such as China as a model.*

Hypothesis 2: *Men are more likely to select China as a model, those that are highly educated are less likely to choose China as a model and those in urban areas are likely to choose China as a model.*

Hypothesis 3: *Respondents that perceive China as having some influence on their country's economy are more likely to choose China as a model.*

³⁵ Elsje Fourie, "Model students: Policy emulation, modernization, and Kenya's Vision 2030", *African Affairs* 113, 453 (2014): 540-562.

³⁶ Josephine Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny and Edem Selormey, *Africans welcome China's influence but maintain democratic aspirations*, Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 489 (Accra: Afrobarometer, 2021).

Afrobarometer Round Eight Surveys

Afrobarometer's Round Eight surveys were conducted in 34 countries in 2019 or 2020.³⁷ Roughly 2,400 randomly selected respondents took part in the survey in each country, totaling approximately 48,084 participants. 87.4 per cent of the respondents explicitly answered on the best model for the future development of their country. Respondents were provided with a range of choices, i.e. China, the United States, former colonial powers (Germany, Britain, Portugal and France), other African countries and their own country and were asked to select one as their preferred model for their country's future development. Five individual-level variables are used as proxies for the hypothesised determinants of selecting China as a model:³⁸ prioritisation of governance issues/citizen concerns, socio-demographics (level of education, gender understood as "socially and culturally constructed distinct roles, attributes, and identities with varying implications for both females and males"³⁹ and the urban-rural divide) and the influence of China's economic activities on the country's economy. Most variables were self-reported, save for whether a respondent lives in an urban or rural area, which was determined by the enumerator. "Don't know" answers, refusals, and missing observations were excluded from the analysis.

Appendix A shows how variables were coded for the analysis. The "urban/rural" binary variable was not identically coded across all countries. The surveys in some countries featured an additional "semi-urban" category that did not appear in other countries. In order to retain these countries for analysis, the "semi-urban" observations were classified under "rural" categories. Under the level of education, three distinct categories were produced: No formal education, primary education and secondary and university education.⁴⁰

A multivariate logistic regression technique was used to analyse the data. The technique permits the use of both country-level and individual-level data simultaneously. One major problem with Afrobarometer data is that the concept of model for future development was not specified more precisely. In other words, the respondents were left to imagine different things when asked about the model. This is evident by 12.6 percent of missing/no response when asked about the model for future development.

The problem is further compounded by the fact that development is a contested and controversial concept. Although Afrobarometer implicitly reduces development to economic aspects, following other African scholars, I understand development as "a holistic evolution of all the aspects of the society, namely politically, socially, psychologically,

³⁷ List of countries: Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Egypt, Eswatini, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritius, Morocco, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Sudan, Togo, Tunisia, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe. See Sanny, and Selormey, *Africans welcome China's influence but maintain democratic aspirations*.

³⁸ Respondents were asked: "In your opinion, which of the following countries, if any, would be the best model for the future development of our country, or is there some other country in Africa or elsewhere that should be our model?"

³⁹ Emeka Eugene Dim and Joseph Yaw Asomah, "Socio-demographic Predictors of Political participation among women in Nigeria: Insights from Afrobarometer 2015 Data", *Journal of International Women's Studies* 20, 2 (2015), 3.

⁴⁰ The categories "informal schooling only", "some primary schooling" and "primary school completed" were merged under primary education, the categories "intermediate school or some secondary school", "secondary school complete", "post-secondary qualification other than university", "some university", "university completed" and "post-graduate" were merged under secondary and university education.

religiously, intellectually technologically, scientifically and cultural for the advancement of the society as a whole as an aggregate of individuals”.⁴¹

Despite the conceptual challenges, the data is useful in exploring the relationship between specific factors and citizens’ perception of China’s model which may inform further revisions of Afrobarometer surveys instruments and empirical studies.

Which Development Models Do Africans Prefer?

The average share of citizens who perceived China as the best model for future development across the 34 countries was 22%, less than the US (33%). South Africa was ranked third at 12%, followed by former colonial powers (Britain, Germany, Portugal or France) (Figure 1).

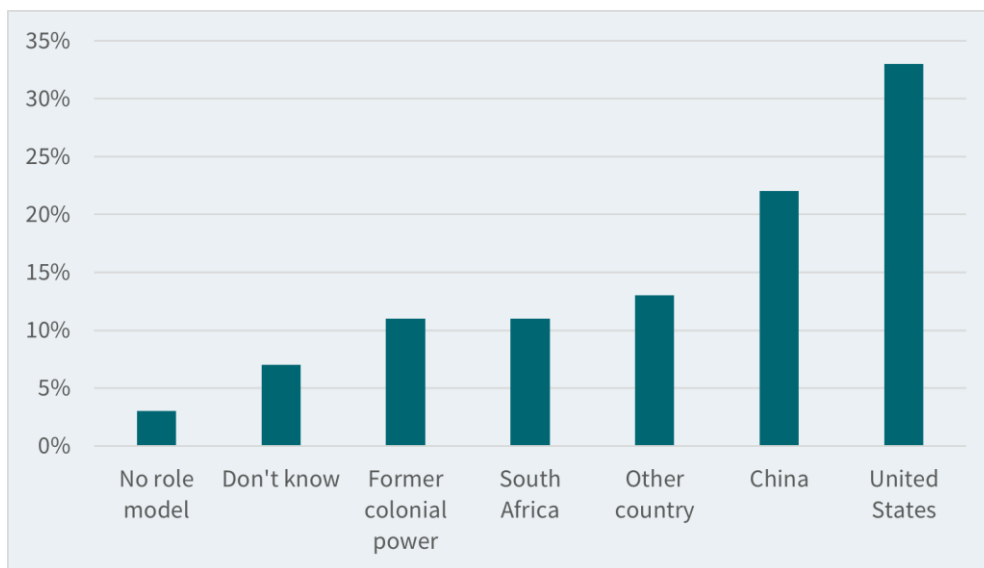


Figure 1: Ranking of the preferred development model in Africa in percent. Source: Afrobarometer Round Eight Data.

Compared to 2014/2015 surveys, the US model gained a positive approval of 3 per cent while the approval of China’s model reduced by 2 per cent in the same positions. South African moved from the fourth position by 1 per cent while former colonial masters dropped to the fourth position by 2 per cent.⁴²

⁴¹ J. Chidozie Chukwuokolo, “Afrocentrism or Eurocentrism: The dilemma of African development”, *OGIRISI: A new journal of African studies* 6 (2009): 24-39.

⁴² Lekorwe, Chingwete, Okuru, and Samson, “China’s growing presence in Africa wins largely positive popular reviews”.

At the country level, there is variation in the preference for China’s model (see Figure 2). The five countries with the most favourable views of China were Benin (47%), Burkina Faso (40%), Mali (39%), Tanzania (35%) and Ethiopia (31%). The five countries with the lowest scores were Eswatini (6%), Liberia (8%), Zimbabwe (9%), Angola (10%) and Namibia (11%).

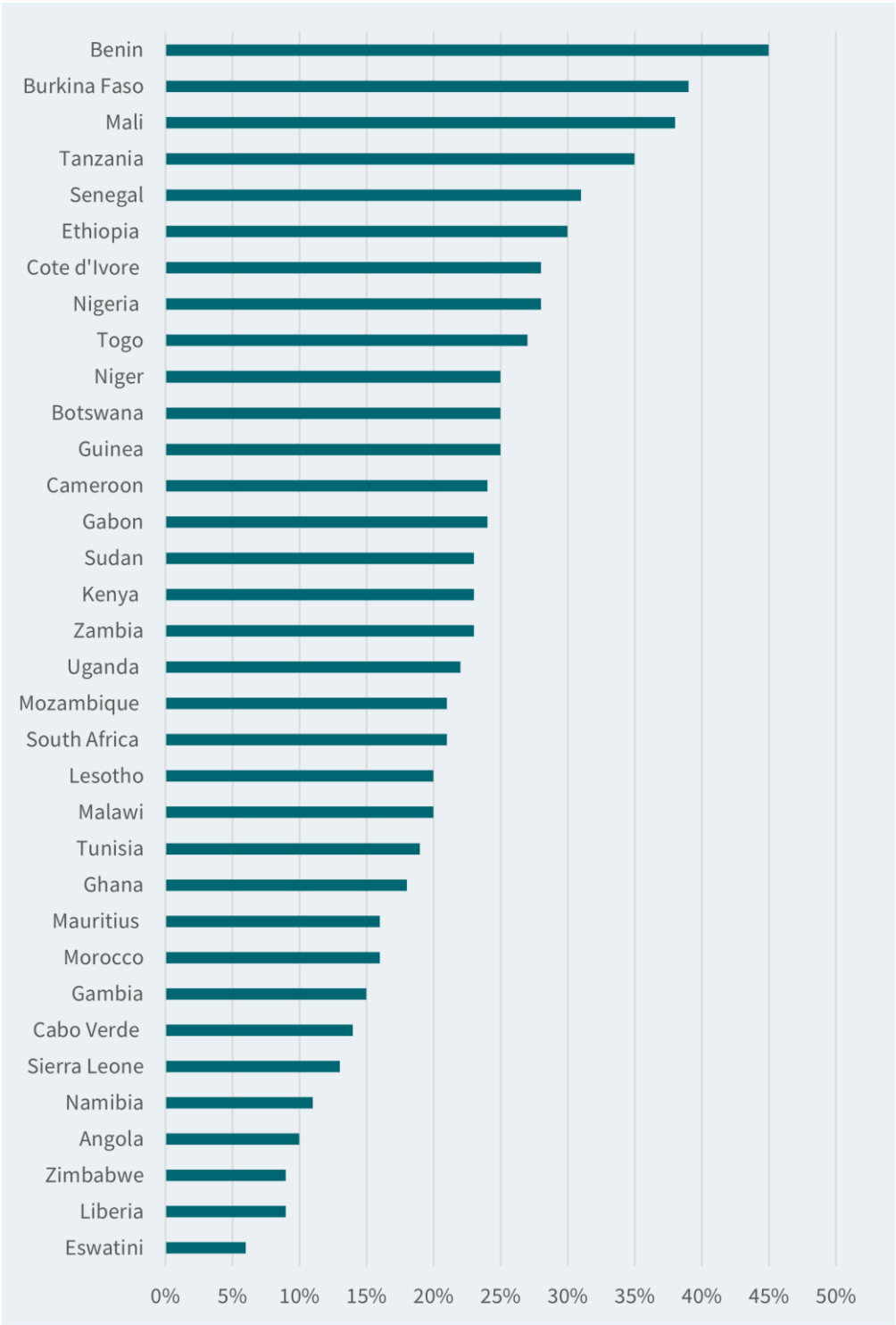


Figure 2: China as the best model for future development in 34 African countries in percent.

Source: Afrobarometer Round Eight Data.

China in Benin

Benin's positive perceptions of China as a development model are twice as high as the continental average. What explains these views? Benin's relations with China since the country's independence in 1960 could be characterised as "on-off".

Although official relations were established in 1964, Benin's strong ties with its former colonial master, France, in a sense pushed China away when France recognised Taiwan. Relations remained timid from the 1970s until the early 2000s. Relations were strengthened with the election of Yayi Boni as president in 2006 and the formal adoption of a legal framework to guide the two countries' engagement.

According to one Beninese scholar, the high level of identification with China as the best model for future development can be attributed to a number of factors.⁴³

Trade relations between the two countries have been growing, with China eventually overtaking France as Benin's main trading partner. While trade is heavily skewed in favour of China, cheap Chinese manufactured goods are accessible to many households. While it could be argued that this accessibility may increase China's visibility among ordinary people, Afrobarometer's Round Eight survey data found that perceptions of the quality of Chinese products have tarnished the country's image.

In Benin China's visibility is also increased by infrastructure projects related to the BRI and peace and security operations in the region (especially the UN peacekeeping mission in Mali). The Chinese have provided both concessional and non-concessional loans for infrastructure projects such as the Akassato-Bohicon road rehabilitation works and the Godomey traffic interchange in Cotonou. But the involvement of Chinese contractors is not just limited to Chinese finance.⁴⁴ Contractors have executed projects funded by development banks. These projects include the reconstruction of the Godomey-Pahou road (financed by the World Bank), the N'Dali-Nikki-Chicandou road (financed by the African Development Bank), and the Fifadji bridge (financed by the West African Development Bank).⁴⁵ Chinese contractors have also carried out projects funded by the Beninese National Treasury, mainly road infrastructure projects like the construction of the Bodjécali-Madécali-Iloua highway, the Segbana-Tsamia road layout works, and the Kilibo-Nigerian border merchandise transit corridors.⁴⁶

How has the impressive growth in China-Benin trade relations and infrastructure development translated into a positive image among the Beninese? Surprisingly, Benin's GDP growth fell from a peak 7.2 per cent in 2013 to 3.8 per cent in 2020, and then rebounded to 7.2 per cent in 2021.⁴⁷ Benin's external debt has also increased from US\$ 2 billion in 2013 to US \$ 6.86 billion in 2021.⁴⁸ Most of the debt acquired during this period were from China. Debt sustainability concerns have been raised as most of Chinese credit lines in Africa are commercial in nature.⁴⁹

Given these indicators, it is difficult to understand why citizens' attitudes towards China are favourable. Benin is one of the countries where a majority of the respondents had a positive opinion about China's leading influence, compared to a positive continental average of 59 per cent. More than two-thirds (73 per cent) of Beninese agree that China now has a lot of influence on the country's economy.⁵⁰ As some scholars have argued, the BRI has led to "development projects that are useful to and visible to ordinary citizens, which then also leads to positive perceptions of China's involvement by locals"⁵¹, perhaps explaining why China tops the list in Benin as the best model for future development.

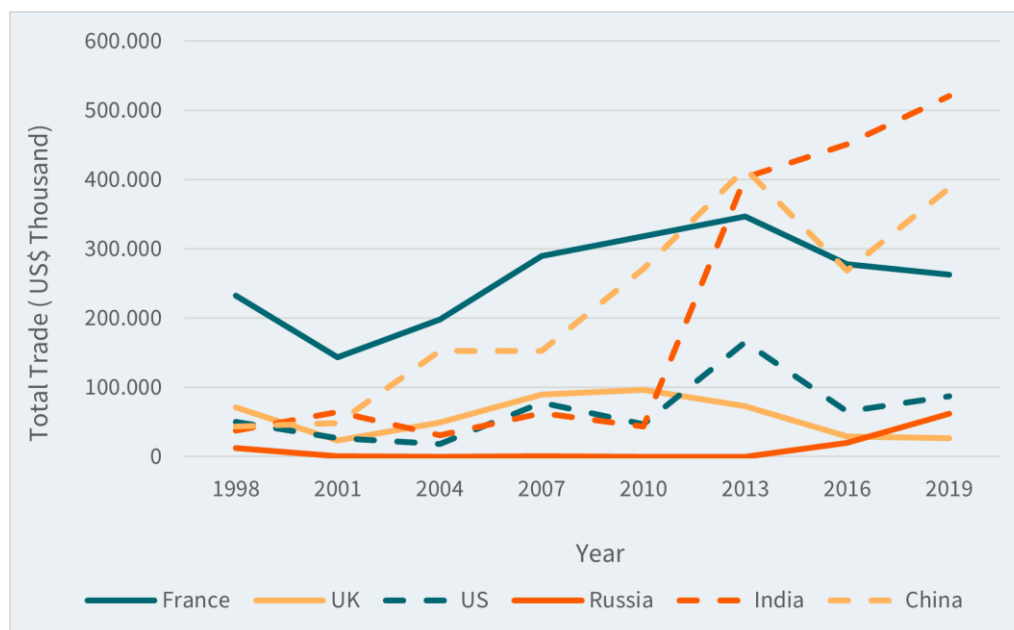


Figure 3: Comparison between China versus global powers in Benin's total trade. Source: World Bank's Integrated Trade System⁵².

Multivariate Analysis

The multivariate analysis consists of two parts. Part one (**Appendix B**) estimates multivariate logit models without country fixed effects, meaning the preferences for the China model are explained by including variables that vary over time. Part two (**Appendix C**) estimates multivariate logit models with country fixed effects, where I do not include variables that do not vary over time. This latter model thus relies solely on the differences within a given country's pool of respondents to explain the preference for the China model. Hypotheses are tested separately, and the outputs of the models yield mixed and surprising results.

Appendix B shows that some of the estimated logistic regression parameters are more significant than others. Respondents mentioning economic issues and infrastructure issues as top priorities for their government are significantly less likely to prefer China as a model. The finding for infrastructure issues is surprising given how important infrastructure projects are for China's footprint in countries like Angola, Benin, DRC, Kenya and Zimbabwe. Government service issues are not a robust explanatory variable throughout the different specifications, as can be seen from the lack of significance in some columns. On average, they seem to have a negative effect on preference for the China model. The other issues are all insignificant.

⁴³ Interview with Folashade Soulé-Kohndou in Johannesburg on 2 November 2022. Trade and investments relations, and China's involvement in peace and security in Mali were cited.

⁴⁴ Folashadé Soulé-Kohndou, "Passive agents? Bureaucratic agency in Africa-China negotiations: A case study of Benin", *LSE Global South Unit Working Paper Series 3* (London: London School of Economics, 2016).

⁴⁵ African Development Bank, Benin: Ndali-Nikki-Chicandou-Nigeria Border Road Asphalt Project, accessed 9 December 2022.

⁴⁶ Soulé-Kohndou, "Passive agents?".

⁴⁷ World Bank, Benin GDP per capita, accessed 9 December 2022.

⁴⁸ World Bank, Benin's External Debt Stock, accessed 9 December 2022.

⁴⁹ Lloyd Thrall, *China's expanding African relations: Implications for US national security* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2015).

⁵⁰ Afrobarometer. Data Sets. Afrobarometer Surveys Round Eight Data, accessed 9 December 2022.

⁵¹ Lina Benabdallah and Daniel Large, "The Key to solving all problems? Unpacking China's development-as-security approach in Mali", *Third World Quarterly* 44, 1 (2023), 214.

⁵² World Integrated Trade Solution, Benin Product exports and imports to China, accessed 9 December 2022.

By contrast, individual characteristics play an important role. The level of education, gender, the urban-rural divide and the influence of China's economic activities on the respondents' own economy are highly significant as well. The coefficients indicate that a person with a higher level of education is less likely to prefer the China model. Specifically, respondents with secondary and tertiary education were less likely to prefer the Chinese model. A male respondent was more likely to prefer the Chinese model than a female respondent. Urban respondents were less likely to prefer the Chinese model than rural respondents. A person who said that China's economic activities have influence on the country's economy was more likely to prefer the Chinese model than a person who said China's economic activities have no influence.

Including this variable in column 5 makes the education variable significant, suggesting that while there is little polarisation by education per se, education becomes a relevant predictor of preferences once it is known whether people think the Chinese have an influence on the economy. There is therefore support for the hypotheses two and three. In other words, in countries, whether the respondent had some level of education, whether the respondent was male or female, whether the respondent was living in an urban or rural area or whether the respondent perceived China's economic activities as having influence on the country's economy is likely to have influenced the respondents' choice of China as a model.

Some of these findings, especially on gender and China's influence on the economy, are similar to Welsh and Chang's study in East Asia. The findings are also close to those of Fei-Ling and Esi Elliot who found a relationship between the social status of Africans and their perceptions of the Chinese.⁵³ It is not clear from the previous analysis, whether individual differences or broader country differences (also reflected in differences in factors such as average education levels) are driving the differences in respondents' preferences. The next step in the analysis is to shed some light on this.

Appendix C shows that removing the country differences with the help of fixed effects makes all the "issue" variables turn insignificant. Respondents mentioning economic issues as one of the top priorities for their government were still less likely to prefer China as a model, but this variable is insignificant now. That suggests that the previous result was mainly driven by country-level differences. In countries where a larger share of the population thinks that the economy should be a top priority of the government, China is less preferred as a model. Within a given country, this pattern is weaker though.

Education level, gender, the urban-rural divide and the influence of China's economic activities on the country's economy are all still significant. Gender, the urban-rural divide, and the influence of China's economic activities have almost identical coefficients, indicating that the effect of these variables is driven by within-country variation (or that there is additional between-country variation that has a similar size).

However, the education coefficient, changes signs compared to the results indicated in **Appendix B**. That is important for interpretation. It means that factors outside the models, which co-determine the average level of education in the countries and the preference for the China model, and which were eliminated with the help of the country fixed effects, were the reason for the negative coefficient in **Appendix B**.

By contrast, in **Appendix C**, where I use only within-country variation, the more educated respondents are more likely to prefer the China model. Nevertheless, there is strong support for the hypothesis two that men are more likely to select China as a model, the highly educated are less likely to choose China as a model and those in urban areas are likely to choose China as a model, and hypothesis three, that respondents that perceive China as

⁵³ Wang and Elliot, "China in Africa: presence, perceptions and prospects".

having some influence on their country's economy are more likely to choose China as a model.

This result corroborates Fei-Ling and Esi Elliot's study that found "the impact of and the reaction to China's presence and activities in Africa vary significantly across different sectors of African society".⁵⁴ The findings are also consistent with Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny and Edem Selormey's study that found more men than women preferred China. However, this particular study differs with regard to respondents' education level, where the two authors found that education makes only a modest difference in their preferred development model.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Sanny and Selormey, *Africans welcome China's influence but maintain democratic aspirations*.

Discussion and Policy Implications

What proved to be important in the analysis are the same factors explaining variation in the selection of China as a model: level of education, gender, the rural-urban divide and the perceptions of influence of China's economic activities on the country's economy. With fixed country effects, those who are more educated are more likely to prefer the China model, compared to without country fixed effects, where there was no such difference, which will have resulted from countries that are, on average, with more educated citizens generally a little less likely to prefer the China model.

The variation in the countries with regard to the level of education may be related to other country-level factors like economic growth. As exemplified by the case of Benin, China-Africa trade relations have not translated to overall effective growth and transformation of economies. As more African countries turn to commercial credits from China, and with underperforming economies, governments may be challenged to repay the loans. The reduction in fiscal space implies that critical social services like education may not receive adequate resources to enhance productivity. In the long-run the education sector may remain underdeveloped with potential consequences for popular perceptions on how African countries ought to respond to the Chinese influence.

Notably, the "issues" variables are all insignificant when focusing only on within-country variation. This means that the outputs of the country effects were driven by country-level differences. In countries where more people on average see, for example addressing infrastructure issues to be a top priority, the Chinese model is less likely to be preferred. As mentioned above this finding is surprising given how important infrastructure projects are for China's footprint in Africa. In most debates, it is always argued that Chinese involvement in infrastructure projects is precisely its comparative advantage, accounting for its popularity.

The finding could be validating Hodzi Obert and John Åberg's assertion that African political elites are applying the China model as a rhetoric device among others to legitimize policies aimed at regime survival and extraction of material benefits from China.⁵⁶ According to the authors, the Chinese model is not a one-size-fits-all model, it comes in different shapes and sizes, allowing African leaders to use their idiosyncratic powers to their political and economic advantage. As African political leaders leverage China's presence for regime survival, the pursued policies are viewed differently by ordinary citizens. From the perspective of development space - a government's ability to formulate and implement its own policies⁵⁷ - it could be argued that China's involvement in Africa's infrastructure development has made a majority of Africans accustomed to China's presence in the infrastructure sector. Therefore, the presence of completed infrastructure projects in some countries may reduce the likelihood that citizens in those countries perceive the implementation of infrastructure projects as a top government priority. In other words, their governments may need to prioritise other economic sectors.

Urban dwellers are likely to consider China as a model, perhaps suggesting that perceptions are influenced by the visibility of Chinese activity in big cities and towns. Chinese-funded mega-projects such as expressways, highways and bypasses are predominantly

⁵⁶ Hodzi and Åberg, "Introduction to the Special Issue: Strategic deployment of the China model in Africa".

⁵⁷ Peter Kragelund, "Donors go home": non-traditional state actors and the creation of development space in Zambia", *Third World Quarterly* 35, 1 (2014): 145-162.

built in urban areas. Although these infrastructure projects are originally intended to radically transform natural, economic, and socio-spatial landscapes and to realise modern and sustainable urban futures through infrastructure, China's approach to infrastructure development in Africa may lead to uneven development in some countries, creating the perception among citizens that some regions are more developed than others.

The fact that the influence of China's economic activities on a country's economy as significant in both estimates (**Appendix B** and **Appendix C**) is interesting when seen in the context of a recent study's finding that China's "perceived level of influence on African economies has waned over the past five years".⁵⁸ This points to the need to further examine China's trends and patterns of engagement in Africa in order to fully understand perceptions.

Finally, although China's recent policy pronouncements suggest that Beijing is determined to promote urbanisation, improve education and reduce inequality in Africa, if China is covertly promoting its own development experience in Africa, this may have mixed results as the choice of China as a model is stronger in some countries than in others.

⁵⁸ Sanny and Selormey, Africans welcome China's influence but maintain democratic aspirations, 1.

Appendices

Appendix A: Variables Recording

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Recording</i>
China is the preferred model of development	China [1] Others [0,] Missing [none, don't know, refused]
Prioritisation of governance issues/citizen concerns	If issue(s) of citizen concern was mentioned as important [1] and [0] otherwise) Missing [none, don't know, refused]
Level of education	No education [0] Primary education [1] Secondary and university education [2] Missing [don't know, refused]
Gender	Male [1] Female [0]
Urban-rural divide	Urban [1] Rural [0]
Influence of China's economic activities on the country's economy	A lot, some, a little [1] None [0] Missing [Don't know/Haven't heard enough/Refused]

Appendix B: Estimated Multivariate Logit Models without Country Fixed Effects


<i>China: Model of development</i>	-1	-2	-3	-4	-5
Economic issues	0.867*	0.865*	0.866*	0.867*	0.816**
	-0.0511	-0.0511	-0.0512	-0.0512	-0.0522
Food/agriculture issues	0.897	0.892	0.885	0.882	0.901
	-0.0607	-0.0606	-0.0602	-0.06	-0.067
Infrastructure issues	0.860*	0.856*	0.848*	0.849*	0.821**
	-0.0563	-0.0561	-0.0557	-0.0557	-0.0584
Government services issues	0.887*	0.886*	0.888	0.887*	0.893
	-0.0536	-0.0536	-0.0538	-0.0538	-0.0587
Health issues	0.952	0.948	0.951	0.953	0.903
	-0.063	-0.0628	-0.0631	-0.0632	-0.0648
Governance issues	1.034	1.034	1.019	1.023	0.945
	-0.0642	-0.0643	-0.0636	-0.0638	-0.0635
Level of education (No education [0], primary education [1], secondary & university [2])		0.989	0.972	0.974	0.892***
		-0.0155	-0.0154	-0.0154	-0.0154
Gender (Female [0], Male [1])			1.308***	1.307***	1.236***
			-0.0299	-0.0299	-0.0305
Urban-Rural divide (Rural [0], Urban [1])				0.870***	0.874***
				-0.023	-0.025
Influence of China's economic activities on country's economy (A lot, some, a little [1], None [0])					2.202***
					-0.115
No of observations	41193	41105	41105	41105	32961
Country fixed-effect	No	No	No	No	No
Exponentiated coefficients; Standard errors in parentheses					
* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001					

Appendix C: Estimated Multivariate Logit Models with Country Fixed Effect

<i>China: Model of development</i>	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Economic issues	0.940 (0.0574)	0.927 (0.0568)	0.927 (0.0569)	0.928 (0.0570)	0.912 (0.0611)
Food/agriculture issues	0.978 (0.0695)	1.009 (0.0720)	1.003 (0.0716)	1.004 (0.0718)	1.027 (0.0805)
Infrastructure issues	0.880 (0.0602)	0.887 (0.0609)	0.879 (0.0604)	0.879 (0.0604)	0.879 (0.0660)
Government services issues	0.879* (0.0551)	0.891 (0.0560)	0.894 (0.0563)	0.894 (0.0563)	0.919 (0.0632)
Level of education (No education [0], Primary [1], secondary & university education [2])		1.197*** (0.0216)	1.173*** (0.0213)	1.173*** (0.0213)	1.062** (0.0211)
Gender (Male [1], Female [0])			1.293*** (0.0303)	1.293*** (0.0303)	1.211*** (0.0308)
Urban-rural divide (Urban [1], Rural [0])				0.896*** (0.0271)	0.900** (0.0295)
Influence China's economic activities on the country's economy					2.247*** (0.121)
No. Observations	41193	41105	41105	41105	32961
Country fixed-effect	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Exponentiated coefficients; Standard errors in parentheses
* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

Megatrends Afrika is a joint project of SWP, IDOS and IfW.
The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s).
All project publications are subject to an internal peer review process.

 This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

SWP Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik | German Institute for International and Security Affairs

IDOS German Institute of Development and Sustainability

IfW Kiel Institute for the World Economy

www.megatrends-afrika.de

megatrends-afrika@swp-berlin.org

ISSN 2747-4275

DOI 10.18449/2023MTA-WP08

 **Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik**
German Institute for
International and Security Affairs

 **IDOS** | German Institute
of Development
and Sustainability

 **ifw** KIEL INSTITUTE FOR
THE WORLD ECONOMY

Funded by:

 Federal Foreign Office

 Federal Ministry
of Defence

 Federal Ministry
for Economic Cooperation
and Development