CHAPTER 1

China’s Foreign Aid and Investment Diplomacy to African Nations—I

Introduction

Africa cannot be divided neatly or logically into regions as Asia can be. Furthermore, given the fact that China has extended foreign assistance to more countries in Africa than in any of the other geographic regions assessed in this book and that it nearly stopped its aid to countries on the continent in the late 1970s, plus the fact that its financial help to Africa differs so greatly between the two periods, this chapter will cover only China’s aid to African countries during phase one, or the early years. China’s foreign aid to African countries from 1980 to the present, or period two, will be assessed in the next chapter.

China had few historical connections with Africa. Some early Chinese explorers made their way to Africa and there was some trade. But there was little contact in modern times. When Mao came to power, most of Africa was controlled by Western countries. Thus China’s foreign aid giving to African countries during period one, with but a few exceptions, came later than its foreign assistance given to Northeast and Southeast Asian nations as well as to countries in South Asia and the Middle East. China’s aid giving started in West Africa and moved to East Africa.

China’s motives for giving aid to Africa were different from its motives in other regions of the world. Bloc solidarity was not a real concern; instead China more frequently sought diplomatic ties and support for its views on socialism, colonialism, and imperialism. African countries generally appreciated China’s foreign aid; China afforded an alternative to Western help. China had no record of colonialism on the continent. Also, the West...
attached conditions to its aid whereas China’s terms for giving foreign aid were minimal.

When Chinese leaders decided to expand China’s diplomatic contacts and subsequently to make a bid to join the United Nations, they looked for the support of the African nations. China also sought to undermine Taiwan’s legitimacy by winning diplomatic ties. Most African nations viewed supporting China as a “cause” to pursue. But China’s foreign assistance very much helped Beijing win friends and attain these diplomatic objectives.

Overall China experienced some important successes as well as some serious setbacks in its aid efforts in Africa. For Chinese leaders it was a learning process. In fact, China formulated its aid policies in large measure based on its experience in Africa. Zhou Enlai’s trip to several African nations in 1963–64 led to China issuing principles on its foreign aid giving that are still cited today.

China’s arms aid supported friendly regimes and/or local wars, or, as China called them, “wars of national liberation.” Initially the West was Beijing’s target. China aimed its aid at reducing US and European influence. Then it was the Soviet Union. As Sino-Soviet differences escalated, China argued that the Soviet Union was not a Third World country and did not understand the problems faced by African nations. Also it was a (social) imperialist country. Later, Chinese leaders spoke of China as a developing country rather than a Communist Bloc nation and its aid as “South-South” aid. Beijing sought leadership of Third World nations and found African countries supportive.

In the mid-1960s, to demonstrate both its seriousness in giving aid and its sincerity toward Africa, China undertook its biggest aid project anywhere—the Tan-Zam Railroad. The line started in Tanzania’s port city of Dar es Salaam and extended into Zambia’s heartland. Both Western countries and several international organizations had rejected this project. In undertaking it China proved its commitment to Africa. The railroad had both political and economic effects: it freed Zambia from having to transport its exports through apartheid South Africa and helped both Zambia and Tanzania commercially.

This was an exception to China’s foreign aid policies as China’s aid to African countries was mainly given in the form of small projects, which China knew could be completed easily and quickly. Yet almost all of its aid projects gave China a chance to use its own engineers and workers while it afforded Beijing a presence in many recipient countries. They also demonstrated the efficiency and generosity of China’s aid giving while enhancing its global image.