

Constructing Strategic Partnerships: China’s Parliament Building Projects in Lesotho and Zimbabwe[†]

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Abstract

This paper examines China’s construction of parliament buildings in Lesotho and Zimbabwe as part of its broader infrastructure diplomacy on the African continent. While publicly framed as mutually beneficial gifts, these projects embed long-term Chinese influence, marginalize local input, and reinforce power asymmetries. Drawing on case studies and political analysis, this study situates China’s actions within the lenses of both contemporary aid strategies and colonial legacies. It argues that such “gifts” serve China’s geopolitical goals, asserting dominance through symbolic and physical presence in African governance, ultimately reflecting a modern form of externally driven statecraft with enduring local and international consequences.

I. Introduction

The People’s Republic of China has financed the construction and refurbishment of at least fifteen nations’ parliament buildings on the African continent (Mulugeta et al. 55). These new buildings have indelibly altered the physical and political landscapes of African capital cities. By architecturally grounding law-making activities and cementing relations with China, parliament construction projects carry with them a uniquely tangible permanence. Compared to investment in natural resource extraction or industrial development, funding parliament construction projects yields intimidating structures built to last that embody the receiving nation’s center of power. In undertaking these projects, China gains international prestige and recognition as a facilitator of modernization. However, despite being advertised as mutually beneficial projects for equal partners, they often reinforce material inequalities between China and receiving nations.

This paper will examine how China has expanded its influence in Africa by constructing new parliament buildings and how recipient nations have reacted to them. This study will consider Chinese parliament building projects within the context of Beijing’s broader aid strategy on the African continent, as well as situate it as part of

Africa's history of building construction by foreign entities, particularly during European colonization. First, I will assess the role physical construction plays in China's aid projects in Africa. Next, I will utilize two case studies on parliament buildings in Lesotho and Zimbabwe to answer the questions "why has China built new parliament buildings for governments throughout the African continent?" and "how have local communities responded to these projects?" Finally, I will analyze the relationship between foreign architectural construction in Africa and colonialism and how that legacy is informative for assessing Chinese foreign aid dynamics, demonstrating that China's aid projects seek primarily to raise China's status as a dominant great power.

Drawing on the intellectual framing from Mulugeta, Tomkinson, and Gallagher's 2020 series entitled *Architecture and Politics in Africa: Making, Living, and Imagining Identities Through Buildings*, this paper views physical parliament buildings as living symbols of national and global influences, power relations, and governance. This paper expands on relevant literature, including Innocent Batsani-Ncube's study of Lesotho in the *Journal of Southern African Studies* and his chapter on Malawi in *Architecture and Politics in Africa*, which discusses Chinese intentions for constructing parliament and local impact. Additionally, this paper utilizes Chinese reports from the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation and local reporting from the Zimbabwe Herald on African views of Chinese aid. Collectively, this paper will compare the parliamentary construction projects that have taken place in Lesotho and Zimbabwe and posit that China's true motivations for constructing parliament buildings in Africa differ from the rhetoric of mutual benefit publicly stated by Chinese officials.

II. Concrete Investment in African Political Landscapes: An Overview of Chinese Construction Projects in Africa

China presents newly constructed parliament buildings to African nations as "gifts" (FOCAC). Gifts are distinct from economic investments in that there is no formal expectation for repayment or reciprocation. Although African nations hosting new parliament buildings are not required to act in a way that benefits China, China conceptualizes these gifts as political investments in its relationships in Africa. When China presents architectural projects as gifts, it leads to deeper ties with African partners and increases its stature on the world stage. China's parliamentary construction in Africa creates a "dyadic and particularistic linkage based on the

exchange of political support in return for material compensation,” increasing receiving nations’ ties to China and China’s overall global influence (Veenendaal 1035).

Seeking to distinguish itself from past paternalistic colonizers, China claims to predicate its overall aid to Africa on the values of mutual respect, mutual benefit, and equality (Hanauer and Morris 21). One report from the Chinese media organization Sina Finance, a Chinese state media organization publicly-owned during the report’s publication, describes China’s dedication to promoting rapid development through aligning shared success and woes, promoting mutual benefit, and seeking win-win results (He). Chinese infrastructure diplomacy in Africa stems from China’s desire to tap into markets to sell goods and services, acquire natural resources, and seek allies at the United Nations and other international fora. At the same time, African governments seek physical infrastructure, Chinese military materiel, and powerful global partners that treat them with respect (Hanauer and Morris 5). China and Africa do both have benefits to gain from engaging in partnerships. Thus, constructing parliament buildings provides a method for China to enhance its status within African nations.

Compared to other visible construction projects, such as the construction of sports stadiums throughout the African continent, parliament buildings constitute an inherently political marker. China’s keenness to work on vanity aid projects reflects a willingness to meet the “political or psychological needs of African leaders” (Mohan and Power 25). However, parliament buildings are inherently democratic institutions that embellish rather than impose executive authority (Mulugeta et al. 7). China’s commitment to constructing buildings that embolden democratic regimes despite possessing an authoritarian system reflects a pragmatic political strategy based on building consensus around anti-colonial, global south solidarity rather than a shared political system.

Situated within a pattern of “prestige project diplomacy,” Chinese-constructed parliament buildings in Africa symbolize China’s technical and political capabilities and attempt to create positive global perceptions of China (Narang). As tangible proof of Chinese economic influence and display of committed partnership with developing African partners, Chinese-built African parliament buildings symbolize interstate friendship, yet underscore unbalanced power dynamics. China physically alters African political landscapes with its architecture, reinforcing its role as a visible major global player with political leverage in Africa. However, during construction processes, China has demonstrated a pattern of ignoring local knowledge,

casting aside local labor, and engineering projects to rely on continued Chinese maintenance and technical support, as will be discussed in subsequent sections. Despite using the rhetoric of mutual gain, China's parliament construction projects in Africa emphasize China's primary goal of signaling its own authority on the African continent. However, few non-Chinese experts accept the notion that China operates in its relations with African nations as equals (Hanauer and Morris xi).

The following section further interrogates China's motivations, looking to Lesotho and Zimbabwe as case studies on Chinese investment in and construction of parliament buildings in Southern Africa. I will assess what benefit these projects bring to the Chinese before considering local reactions in the following section. As University of Michigan Professor of Architecture Kuukuwa Manful writes, "Buildings that host political institutions do not emerge in a social, aesthetic, and historical vacuum. Rather, they are inflected by symbolic, social, and political utterances" (Mulugeta et al. 7). This paper seeks to parse out these utterances and their importance to Sino-African relations.

III. Lesotho

After accumulating over \$7.5 million US dollars in construction costs, China handed over a newly constructed parliament building to the government of Lesotho in 2012 (Batsani-Ncube). As a symbolic expression of China and Lesotho's growing strategic partnership, the project was ushered in by Chinese efforts to scale up the Forum on Africa-China Cooperation (FOCAC). First launched in 2000 in Beijing, FOCAC provides a unique diplomatic tool to elevate Sino-African dialogue and advance "constructive South-South cooperation for mutual benefit" (Shelton and Paruk 3). Leading up to the first FOCAC summit, Lesotho served as the Southern African Development Community chair, which gave Prime Minister Mosisili important leadership over the first FOCAC summit. After the Free Tibet movement gained global traction, China received intensified backlash against its authoritarian policies (Hillman). Thus, China sought allies in Africa that would come to its aid at the United Nations (Hillman). China gifted Lesotho a parliament building within this context of China's vested interest in growing global diplomatic ties.

Despite symbolizing a partnership between China and Lesotho, China quickly came to dominate every aspect of the parliament construction process. As University of London Usawa Postdoctoral Research Fellow Innocent Ncube put in a London School of Economics blog post, "While the donation fulfilled an existing need in Lesotho, the mode of project execution indicates China's intentions to leverage the gift

for long-term political influence in the parliamentary institution” (Batsani-Ncube). By determining the design, construction timeline, and future maintenance of African parliament buildings, China embedded its influence in governmental institutions and established points of access to political elites (Batsani-Ncube). As Lesotho’s most prominent political building, housing the office of the King, the Senate, and the National Assembly, the parliament embodies the most important elements of Lesotho’s political system (Batsani-Ncube) However, the Lesotho Parliament building hosts a visible China aid logo at its entrance gate and a semi-permanent Chinese Technical Team responsible for building upkeep (Batsani-Ncube). Sponsoring this parliament building allowed China to leave its mark on Lesotho’s political landscape and strategically sustain political connections.

IV. Zimbabwe

In October 2023, China gifted Zimbabwe a \$200 million USD new parliament building in Harare’s Mt. Hampden area. It comprises a six-story office complex and a four-story building housing the National Assembly and Senate (Nyathi). This building project symbolizes the continuation of Zimbabwe’s Look East Policy, which was championed by former President Robert Mugabe, and decades of heavy Chinese investment in Zimbabwe’s mining and agriculture sectors (Nyathi). The construction of this parliament building also sits within the context of past large-scale Chinese construction projects in Zimbabwe, including the construction of Victoria Falls International Airport, the National Defense College in Harare, Hwange Thermal Power Station, and a pharmaceutical hub in Southerton (Zimbabwe Herald). Between 2004 and 2009, China transferred roughly \$103 million US dollars of development assistance to Zimbabwe through the construction of two schools and a hospital, contributions to the World Food Programme, and concessional loans (Chipaike and Bischoff 3). Compared to Lesotho, China’s history of aid provision in Zimbabwe is much more extensive.

Chinese support for Zimbabwean governance dates back to the early 1960s, when China provided “largely unconditional military support for Zimbabwe’s fight against colonialism” (Chun 6). During the Rhodesian Bush War, China provided training and weapons to Mugabe’s ZANU guerrilla fighters in support of establishing Zimbabwean independence, which solidified their special relationship with Zimbabwe’s ruling elites (Chun 6). China has long had a critical role in encouraging Zimbabwe to detach from its past colonists, while bolstering its own relations with

Zimbabwe. China's construction of a new parliament building in Mt. Hampden reflects a continuation of this strategy. A press release from the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) on Zimbabwe's new parliament building quotes Shanghai Construction Group project manager Cai Libo saying, "This is a gift from the Chinese government to the Zimbabwean government. It was funded by China Aid funds, it's a grant to Zimbabwe and not a loan so there is no payment to be made in the future" (FOCAC). Indicative of an increasingly strong partnership, China's construction of a new Zimbabwean parliament building reflects China's dedication to gaining support from African partners. Zimbabwe's move to the new Chinese parliament building from the old colonial-era Victorian-style building in central Harare also mirrors its transition from gaining foreign influence by the British, its former colonizer, to developing a partnership with the Chinese. By erecting parliament buildings in both Lesotho and Zimbabwe, China has demonstrated its intention to maintain control over many aspects of the building process, thus cementing its long-term presence in these states.

V. Local Responses to Chinese Development

Despite grandiose speeches from Lesotho Prime Minister Pakalitha Mosisili and Zimbabwean President Mnangagwa on the valuable brotherhood between Africa and China, Chinese parliament construction projects have not been carried out without criticism. Chinese project managers appear to consistently ignore local knowledge. In Lesotho, China deliberately ignored input given by the Lesotho government's steering committee on the new parliament building, instead calling upon the China Northeast Architectural Design and Research Institute to produce the design and appointing the Chinese Yanjian Group to construct the building and employ Chinese workers (Batsani-Ncube). Local labor was noticeably underutilized. The project management and construction operations of the new parliament building in Lesotho gave near total power to the Chinese, which undermined key in-country institutional arrangements, disregarded domestic labor sources, and sowed seeds of distrust of China's intentions in Lesotho.

Additionally, China's lack of consultation with local stakeholders in Lesotho has led to unintended negative consequences that have exacerbated existing domestic political tensions. The building constructed by China fails to adequately accommodate both Lesotho's National Assembly of elected officials and Senate of hereditary chiefs because it is too small, causing most senators to conduct debate within the British-constructed parliament building in central Maseru, as opposed to the Chinese building

in Mt. Hampden. This architectural oversight has caused the Senate to interpret this building project as a deliberate scheme to marginalize traditional leaders and has amplified the long-held intra-parliamentary conflict between the National Assembly and Senate (Batsani-Ncube). Parliament staff were denied permission to visit the site during construction, which prevented any Zimbabwean government staffer or official from expressing that the room allocated to the Senate on the building's third floor would not be sufficient for debate (Batsani-Ncube). The abandoned Senate chamber has now been converted into a meeting room for the National Assembly's portfolio committee. Feeling slighted by the Chinese and the executive branch, the Senate has refused to conduct debate in the new building (Batsani-Ncube).

Chinese design choices on furniture have further upset Lesotho's government staff. Chinese contractors installed insufficiently sturdy chairs that, according to one technocrat, were not suitable for the average politician in Lesotho (Batsani-Ncube). Not only did they break under the weight of cabinet ministers, but the chairs also generated local dismay due to their color. The previous British-constructed parliament building had traditional green seats in order to match the British House of Commons. In Lesotho, this color came to be regarded as the expected hue for governing body adornments. Rather than maintain this custom, China upholstered the chairs with red fabric, a color that not only gestured towards China's influence but also gave an unofficial signal of endorsement of the ruling Lesotho Democratic Congress, who are closely associated with the color red (Batsani-Ncube). Besides their poor structure and controversial color, the chairs were also faulted for being arranged in an ill-informed fashion. In designing the room, Chinese contractors failed to consider Lesotho's Westminster parliamentary traditions and demarcate between members' seats and the Speaker's gallery (Batsani-Ncube). Eventually, these problems were resolved by establishing a barrier to create separation between the members and the Speaker's gallery and replacing the chairs with brown ones, which are seen as neutrally colored (Batsani-Ncube). Collectively, China's lack of consultation with Lesotho parliament staff or officials created numerous avoidable hindrances and sowed local discontent towards China.

Similarly, in Zimbabwe, China's construction of a new parliament building marks another milestone in a development assistance relationship between China and Zimbabwe. Zimbabwean media has publicly praised the new parliament building. As the Zimbabwe Herald put it, "What this shows is that Western countries are not entirely the start and end of partnerships in development, as there are now alternatives

which developing countries can cooperate with” (Zimbabwe Herald). Thus, China has offered an alternative manner of development partnership compared to Western relationships born out of neocolonialism. Although the Herald proclaims the new parliament building as a bold signal of friendship with the Chinese that “exudes the Zimbabwean spirit, culture, and heritage,” this media platform is known to spread biased coverage in favor of the Chinese (Ziwira). The Zimbabwe Herald is known to parrot information shared in China’s People’s Daily newspaper or Xinhua (Olander). Thus, the Zimbabwean government strives to maintain an image of collaboration with China, but this propagandized reporting may conflict with true local sentiments.

As China pursues projects that further highlight Zimbabwe’s reliance on China and emphasize their inequality in power and resources, Zimbabweans become more disillusioned with China’s widespread presence in the country. Zimbabwe’s long-term, extensive relationship with China has not lacked problems. According to Hautungimana’s 2022 study of Zimbabwean sentiments towards China, only 37% of urban, educated Zimbabweans feel positively about Chinese impact in Zimbabwe (Olander). In 2013, Robert Mugabe traveled to China and reportedly signed a “mega-deal” that would provide billions of dollars in aid funding to support the government’s economic blueprint, entitled the Zimbabwe Agenda for Sustainable Socio-Economic Transformation (Chipaike and Bischoff 5). However, common people have failed to see these “mega-deals” meaningfully materialize. According to one observer, “we are told of Chinese aid but we are yet to see real impact” (Chipaike and Bischoff 6). With a lack of transparency in the two countries’ negotiations and Zimbabwe’s overall reliance on Chinese support, China is empowered to act in a secretive and corrupt way (Chipaike and Bischoff 958).

Additionally, the money for the Zimbabwean parliament building was channeled directly between the Chinese government and its project contractor, Shanghai Construction Group. Rather than channel money through the recipient country’s banks, China opted to keep financial exchanges between its own actors. This prevented Zimbabwe from exercising oversight over this significant project. As Bindura University scholar Ronald Chipaike put it, Zimbabwe as a “small isolated state with an authoritarian and opaque government will find it difficult to exert meaningful agency in its relations with China owing to desperation, lack of transparency, as well as the unwillingness of the state to work with civil society and other non-state actors” (Chipaike and Bischoff 949). Exclusion of local actors in financial transactions has

further prevented African governments from impactfully advocating for their needs and wants during Chinese construction projects.

While China reaches construction agreements without legal expectations of reciprocity, it appears that these gift exchanges create a bilateral expectation between the giver and receiver (Narang). By emphasizing China's generosity and the receiving nation's need, the act of parliament construction reinforces material inequalities between China and African nations. China uses terms like "development assistance" and "partnership" to describe these African aid projects, steering away from terminology that emphasizes the distance between donor and recipient (Narang). Yet, implementing Chinese building projects emphasizes the asymmetrical power between China and aid-receiving nations. While initial construction agreements may appear as mutually beneficial—China strengthens ties with a partner, and the partner gains a critical piece of infrastructure—the disproportionate power that China exerts during project management, labor recruitment, and materials procurement undermines the agency of African nations in these arrangements. Limited participation of locals and Chinese domination in constructing new parliament buildings has had implications for governance patterns and dysfunction. China's sole domination of design choices in Lesotho and Zimbabwe by bestowing total project authority and design responsibility on the Yanjian Group and Shanghai Construction Group symbolizes its true intentions to assert its authority over African states without critical regard for African desires. Collectively, Chinese domination has cemented its role as an authority-holding project manager and prescriptive donor among its subordinate partners.

VI. Colonialism and a History of Foreign Construction in Africa

Buildings constructed by foreign entities in Africa, especially those with governing functions, bear unique political and social relevance due to the legacy of extractive colonialism and colonial architecture within Africa. In Lesotho and Zimbabwe, both states' previous parliament buildings were reinvisioned colonial buildings. Moving the government from a prior colonial building to a Chinese one indicates not only shifting global allegiance but also a continuation of donor-recipient relations. Physical buildings are spaces where national politics, culture, and individual identity are tangibly negotiated across Africa (Mulugeta et al. 2). Additionally, buildings symbolize interconnected meanings associated with colonialism, nationalism, and globalization (Mulugeta et al. 2).

Architecture has historically been used by colonial establishments to entrench inequalities and emphasize their power over colonized peoples. By erecting imposing European architectures, dominating the building processes, and influencing European hegemonies of aesthetic taste, colonial architecture emphasized the distance between rulers and the ruled (Mulugeta et al. 2). In 1911, colonial architect and designer of South Africa's Union Buildings, Herbert Baker wrote to Prime Minister Jan Smuts stating that "Architecture has its political use: public buildings being the ornament of a country; it establishes a nation, draws people and commerce, makes the people love their native country, which passion is the origin of all great actions in the Commonwealth." Baker's Union Buildings have served as a center for colonial, apartheid, and post-1994 regimes. Despite China's efforts to distinguish its modern development assistance to Africa as brotherhood and arrangements between equals, the aims of architectural gifts, especially those for government buildings, mimic the motivations of European colonists in the early 20th century.

Since colonization up until the present day, foreign actors have neglected the input of local architects in designing physical structures. Colonial authorities in Africa have overwhelmingly taken a "top-down, exclusionary, and statist approach" to architectural projects, systematically ignoring local civil society input into physical construction (Bissell 126). Since the 1990s, there have been efforts in Zimbabwe to construct buildings with designs influenced by local heritage by including elements like stone columns and carvings that mimic pre-colonial Zimbabwean structures in visible buildings like the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe and Kingdom Hotel in Victoria Falls, reflecting a desire to uplift traditional design practices (Saidi). By marginalizing in-country expertise and design input in Lesotho and Zimbabwe, China overshadows the desires of local peoples to interact with spaces that reflect their cultural heritage.

Mohan and Power assert that China's claims of supporting African partners by gifting them expensive construction projects are reminiscent of "echoes of earlier merchants and imperialists, who insisted their interests were largely commercial, but who ended up becoming more and more mired in internal institutional building and policing" (Mohan and Power 28). While China may be treating African government officials with deeper respect than past colonizers and dispersing a more palatable narrative, its motivations of weaponizing development in Africa as a tool for economic extraction and geopolitical domination bear similarity to the foreign actors in Africa that came before them.

VII. Conclusion

China's construction of parliament buildings in Africa reflects China's dedication to concrete investment in the architecture of African governance. Yet, China's rhetoric of mutual benefit has not aligned in practice with its tendency to dominate construction projects without consultation from local communities, utilization of existing structures, or labor engagement, leaving local communities skeptical of China's intentions. This paper has explained how China has presented aid projects as mutually beneficial displays of solidarity with African partners but, in practice, has entrenched material inequalities between China and its partners. Case studies in Lesotho and Zimbabwe demonstrate China's unwillingness to consult with local stakeholders on parliament construction projects and tendency to create reliance on Chinese technical knowledge and management, revealing China's true desire to assert further authority over the African continent, which echoes the past motivations of European colonists in Africa.

As Beck put it in 1998, buildings are thus "politics with bricks and mortar," which shape political conceptions of the nation, community, and its place within international society. Buildings form "co-constitutive relationships between architecture and politics and political institutions" (Mulugeta et al. 1). Chinese-constructed parliament buildings in Lesotho and Zimbabwe have indeed come to embody the living, evolving relationships between China and its African partners. However, the presence of Chinese domination in the construction process and lingering Chinese influence built into these buildings reflect China's desire to cement its long-term presence in Africa.

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