

China in Africa: Debtbook Diplomacy?

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Abstract

The public debt is surely one of the most important challenges of the 21st century for many African countries. For this continent—which has a young and dynamic population—it remains complicated to reach development and financial autonomy as long as it supports a lot of debt obligation. However, that modern African legend of Sisyphus got more interest thanks to China's return. Indeed, during the last two decades, we have seen Beijing's investing more in Africa on behalf of a certain old friendship and become the first bilateral commercial partner of the African continent (2009) instead of Western powers. This change created new political and economic contexts swaying between competition and cooperation according to protagonists (governments, national and international economic operators ...) and situations. At that stage, the Chinese diplomacy used in Africa has been sometimes perceived as an opportunity, sometimes as a curse by observers. That is why many researchers, influenced by the rumors of a new colonialism, compare it to a "Debtbook Diplomacy". And because journalists are always only presenting one part of the problem, it is easier to compare Chinese presence in Africa as an invasion. This article's goal is to make a modest contribution to the long list of papers already written with the purpose to highlight Sino-African relations through a qualitative research (collection, comparison and analysis of documents, interviews, reports ...).

Keywords

Africa, China, Diplomacy, Debt, Development

1. Introduction

According to a realistic vision of the international relations, the war has always been a part of the history of the humankind and the anarchy represents a permanent part of the international system (Thucydides, Machiavel, Hans Morgenthau, Kenneth Waltz, etc.). And if conflicts are present since the dawn of time,

let say that it is similar to the peace. This dual view is related to the foreign policy which, despite its specificity, is closely connected to the diplomacy. This aspect underlines at the same time the interdependency, and the holistic complexity of the relations shared by states all over the world.

So, when two actors use their “Hard Power” to survive on the battlefield of the international scene, we irremediably have a transition towards the *détente*, a process that is introduced by the diplomacy. However, even if Thomas Hobbes considered the international relations as a State of nature where the insecurity is guaranteed in the absence of a Leviathan (Hobbes, 1651), this kind of situation does not necessarily happen after a conflict. Hence, the “Soft Power” of the State intervenes. As Raymond Aron said, the two main actors of the History of the international relations are the ambassador and the soldier. They are very important when it comes to the foreign policy of their country and they respectively resolve problems by using the dialog or the violence (Aron, 1984).

With this in mind, it should first be noted that diplomacy which belongs to the field of peace and cooperation processes has dramatically evolved in the 20th century, a period that has been the theater of bloody clashes across the globe especially with the two World Wars. Now, in an era of increasing interaction, the People’s Republic of China has become the center of attention of all major international political actors through its miraculous development in several areas. Finally, economic growth has migrated to Asia in the 21st century and we witnessed the spectacular rise of the Middle Kingdom, which wants to regain its place of leader in the world. In order to achieve this goal, the Chinese did not simply open their boundaries. They sent ambassadors around the world. In our article, we will focus our attention on Africa.

In a decade, the Westerners, yet masters of the ship, had to gradually barter their captain’s hat for the passenger’s hat. China is now in charge of many exchanges with African partners, a return to the ground they had once trodden (Zheng He’s expeditions from 1405 to 1433) with a new diplomacy obeying to specific criteria. That is when rumors, concerning neocolonialism, have been noticed. Indeed, several voices among the former colonizers of Africa have risen to accuse the Asian giant of plundering their past colonies, of promoting the sustainability of the oligarchic and corrupt governments, of undermining the efforts made about human rights and of putting into debt a continent that is already struggling to develop.

All of these concerns have drawn new leads for the scholars. In this regard, we distinguish two main batches. The one that says the Chinese presence is a danger and the one that considers it as advantageous for Africa. Consequently, a plethora of works on Chinese diplomacy was written. And many experts have recently called it debtbook diplomacy. Knowing that, we want to examine this point that raises important research questions. Would the African debt be disappearing? Would it not, on the contrary, be revived by China’s African foreign policy in the 21st century? What are the numbers of the cooperation between

China and Africa today? Rather than supporting popular beliefs and jumping to hasty and erroneous conclusions, our study proposes to exploit old and recent facts. An analysis will begin by assessing the available literature, and then expound on two variables in relation to debt and development before raising some economic resolutions for African countries.

2. Literature Review

China has often been portrayed as a faraway mysterious and scary land in the minds of a very religious African population. Indeed, some prejudices are strong regardless of the period of History they are grounded. Generally, an individual judges other people according to the first impressions and information gathered from its location. If the dragon, legendary creature, represents the Beast of Revelation, the incarnation of Satan in Christianity imported from the West, it is not so for Asia. In China, the dragon symbolizes life and power. These biblical references seem to be out of the context of our article, but it is more and less like this we can introduce the works on China in Africa of the last two decades. Many of these are less objective to the extent that researchers have abounded in opposite directions following their feelings. So, we have seen anti-Chinese and pro-Chinese publications according to the authors' degree of love for the red flag. Without a doubt, writers, philosophers, scientists and even emperors have all had to speak at least once publicly about a growing Beijing's importance. It is then possible to quote the famous phrase of Napoleon Bonaparte, which was taken up in 1973 by Alain Peyrefitte as a book title: "when China awakes, the whole world will tremble" (Peyrefitte, 1973).

The Chinese fascination has continued to grow as globalization has constantly disfigured international geopolitics. This explains the interest aroused by Chinese diplomacy in Africa for researchers from everywhere. We can cite, for example: Jean-Raphaël Chaponnière, Jean-Pierre Cabestan, Thierry Pairault, Martine Bulard, Thierry Wolton, Serge Michel and Michel Beuret, Eric Nguyen, WarisOyesina, Adama Gaye, Elizabeth Sidiropoulos, Henri Mova Sakanyi, Etanisl Ngodi, Julien Bokilo, Ian Taylor, He Wenping, Wang Duanyong, François Lafargue, Li Anshan, Deborah Brautigam, etc. The list is very long. That is why we will simply select a few books that have marked our sensitivity on the subject.

However, as far as a debt diplomacy is concerned, the list is not long because the phenomenon is still recent. The expression "Debtbook Diplomacy" was introduced for the first time by Sam Parker and Gabrielle Chefitz. It appears in an article published on May 24, 2018, by the *Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs* at the *Harvard Kennedy School*: "Debtbook Diplomacy: China's Strategic Leveraging of its Newfound Economic Influence and the Consequences for U.S. Foreign Policy" (Parker & Chefitz, 2018). This article describes the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), also known as One Belt One Road (OBOR) like a trap for the Southern States. Indeed, according to their analysis—supported by recent events and statistics—Chinese diplomacy would consist, first, in offering

several loans to the countries concerned. These large sums would then be used to build roads, infrastructure and accelerate the economic development of these forgotten areas. But the two researchers tried to show that most of these works are not economically viable for the recipient countries. A fact that would ultimately prevent them from reimbursing quickly the accumulated debt, hence the current tendency to mortgage their rights on geostrategic infrastructure that are generally ports. In other words, the two scholars are convinced that this is a form of debtbook diplomacy. It most benefits China, which, gains a reliable network for its supplies and a politico-economic influence on its debtors. The goal here would be to minimize Western influence in the world (USA) and especially in Asia (Parker & Chefitz, 2018).

However, the debtbook diplomacy is not a new trend. On January 23, 2017, Brahma Chellaney, an Indian researcher, used a similar expression to refer to the loans given by Beijing. He thus preferred to speak in terms of “Debt-Trap Diplomacy” in an article entitled: “China’s Debt-Trap Diplomacy”. He also supported the idea that Chinese leaders would like to use their diplomacy as an economic tool: firstly, to meet their international security needs in some regions; secondly, to weaken the sovereignty of the indebted States (Chellaney, 2017). In the same vein, the *New Delhi Times* also published a study focusing on the problem of debt in Africa: “Chinese Diplomacy, BRI and ‘Debt-Trap’ in Africa”. It considers debt as a diplomatic lever used by Beijing to be reimbursed in raw materials; to establish itself in the African domestic market; to send its workforce and relocate some of its factories in Africa. For the journal, all of this seems to be related to a form of neocolonialism (New Delhi Times, 2018).

Nevertheless, some authors such as Lynley Donnelly have a more moderate position on the issue concerning the African debt. She considers it as a serious problem for the continent, but she does not intend to compare Asian cases to African cases. In her article: “Africa’s Debt to China Is Complicated”, she reports the words of Cobus Van Staden, a researcher from the *South African Institute of International Affairs*: “Quite a lot of the remaining debt is to Western countries and particularly Western private lenders” (Donnelly, 2018). These comments show that the African debt is not the prerogative of China. This theory has been particularly enlightened by the figures and statistics of the *China-Africa Research Initiative* (CARI) at the *Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies*. Thus, Janet Eom, Deborah Brautigam and Lina Benabdallah provide evidence that China’s debtbook diplomacy or debt-trap diplomacy is not entirely responsible for Africa’s growing risk of over-indebtedness (Eom, Brautigam, & Benabdallah, 2018).

Even though, authors like John Pomfret (Pomfret, 2018), Annie Wu (Wu, 2018), Matt Ferchen (Ferchen, 2018), Erin Cook (Cook, 2018), Tim Fernholz (Fernholz, 2018) and others addressed questions about the debtbook diplomacy or debt-trap diplomacy, the literature is certainly not yet abundant. But the articles mentioned above already allow us to appreciate two opinions. The first

supports the idea that China is conducting a debtbook diplomacy in Africa whereas the other—far from ignoring that Chinese loans are increasing the level of the debt—argues that Africa’s debt is a complex matter which does not solely concern China. In order to understand all aspects of the problem, we will begin our study by analyzing all kinds of diplomacy allegedly conducted by China in Africa. These are connected to the famous debtbook diplomacy.

3. A Debtbook Diplomacy throughout Africa?

“There are two ways to conquer and enslave a country.

One is by the sword. The other is by debt.”

John Adams, Second President of the United States of America from 1797 to 1801.

3.1. China Seen by Foreigners: A Multifaceted Diplomacy

The 24 Character Strategy also known as the Strategy of the low profile was addressed to the Chinese people in 1991 by Deng Xiaoping (邓小平): “Observe calmly; secure our position; cope with affairs calmly; bide our capacities and bide our time; be good at maintaining a low profile; and never claim leadership. 冷静观察, 站稳脚跟, 沉着应付, 韬光养晦, 善于守拙, 绝不当头” (Langlois, 2015). As expected, these advices were useful because China is now the most dynamic economy in the world. However, its success has not always been well received everywhere. In Africa where it has almost replaced traditional partners (Europe and USA) in various areas, we can notice a certain fear and hostility toward China. Indeed, the African diplomacy of China, represented by the Forum On China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), is an exploit because it tends to gather all the continent. The seventh summit which take place in Beijing from the 3rd to the 4th of September 2018 mobilized heads of state and representatives of 53 countries except the former Kingdom of Swaziland officially renamed eSwatini since April 2018. This latter was absent of this triennial event because of its close ties with the Republic of China. Then, we would like to remind that the aid, the grants and the financing of People’s Republic of China are only available for the nations that accept to terminate all diplomatic relationship with Taiwan. Actually, Beijing still considers this island as one of its provinces since 1949.

This big event of the Third World sends us to the 1960s when all colonized or occupied nations were fighting together to defend their rights against the voracious appetite of colonial and imperialist powers such as France at the end of the Second World War. Mostly characterized by the aid at the beginning, the Chinese diplomacy will focus on isolating Formosa’s island. This latter would gradually lose the recognition of South Africa in 1998, Senegal in 2005, Chad in 2006, Malawi in 2008, Gambia and Sao Tome and Principe in 2016 (Chaponnière, 2008), and lastly the Burkina Faso in 2018. These changes have pushed the leaders of this autonomous zone—they have not officially declared their independence yet—to accuse Beijing of performing simultaneously the “Dollar Diplo-

macy”¹ and the “Checkbook Diplomacy”² by financing prohibitive infrastructure (Brautigam, 2009). Therefore, this throwback shows us already the importance of Africa in Chinese future development plans.

When Europeans preferred to invest in Central and Oriental Europe instead of Africa, Americans simply closed their eyes on economies that needed money to develop. Thereby, these traditional partners made the choice to neglect this area which represents nevertheless, “9.5% of world oil reserves, 30% of the planet’s mineral reserves, 80% of coltan resources, 90% of platinum, 50% in diamonds, 40% of gold, 45% of cobalt, 23% of antimony and phosphate, 17% of copper and manganese, 15% of bauxite and zinc, and 10% of chrome” (Sakanyi, 2010). Of course, these numbers are exposed to a permanent evolution, but they are still important regardless of time. We also have arable lands, a middle class and a customer base less sophisticated. In order to win this promising African market for its products, China monopolized the building sector, because they understood that Africans were more receptive to what they can touch and see. This wise decision allowed the dragon to get closer to the elephant.

But even if the last FOCAC had as a theme: “Work Together for a Common Development and a Shared Future”, it remains that several critics have been launched against Chinese diplomacy. These allegations blame it for putting the African continent into debt or debt distress, and undermining the past efforts of the Bretton Woods institutions. These accusations have recently become more widespread by Washington which is waging a trade war against Beijing. It is on this conflicting backdrop that Donald Trump’s administration continued to assert that the Chinese were not good economic partners for Africa. Using a report written by two researchers from *Harvard Kennedy School*, the White House said that their rivals were investing heavily in Africa to secure their own interests. Naturally, “in its 2018 National Defense Strategy, the U.S. warned that China is leveraging ‘predatory economics’ as a means to achieve both regional and global strategic ends. One such type of predatory economics is what the authors have termed ‘Debtbook Diplomacy’, the coercive leveraging of debt to acquire strategic assets or political influence over debtor nations” (Parker & Chefitz, 2018).

In 2017, researchers and Asian experts were already suspecting the famous Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to be a means of indebting the weakest countries that were concerned. Brahma Chellaney, Professor of Strategic Studies at the New Delhi-based Center for Policy Research, was the first to assimilate the large Chinese loans to a debt-trap diplomacy. “For example, Sri Lanka’s Mattala Rajapaksa International Airport, which opened in 2013 near Hambantota, has been dubbed the world’s emptiest. Likewise, Hambantota’s Magampura Mahinda Rajapaksa Port remains largely idle, as does the multibillion-dollar Gwadar Port in

¹The “Dollar Diplomacy” is a form of foreign policy that was formerly used by the United States through its economy and military power to benefit from the access to international markets, particularly in Latin America and East Asia.

²The “Checkbook Diplomacy” refers to any foreign policy that uses economic aid and investment between countries to obtain diplomatic interests.

Pakistan. For China, however, these projects are operating exactly as needed: Chinese attack submarines have twice docked at Sri Lankan ports, and two Chinese warships were recently pressed into service for Gwadar Port security” (Chellaney, 2017). For him, “just as European imperial powers employed gunboat diplomacy³, China is using sovereign debt to bend other states to its will” (Chandran, 2017).

To launch the construction of Hambantota’s Port, China lent the government 361 million USD in near-market-rate loans, but after a shortfall in revenues, the country contracted another debt of 1.9 billion USD to improve it and build an airport nearby. Unable to pay this amount, Sri Lanka finally relinquished most of its rights concerning the port for a period of 99 years lease in 2017 (Parker & Chefitz, 2018). Since this example has become the most popular when it comes to accuse China of being a predatory nation working in the shadows to expand its communication networks and its influence in geostrategic areas that strengthen the “String of Pearls”⁴. Of course, the Americans were eager to compare these Asian cases to African cases.

In **Table 1**, we will retain that the Djiboutian debtbook progression number (5) is much higher than that of Kenya (1.5). This level has been reached because of the cost of infrastructure. Indeed, the Djiboutian port in Ethiopia and the Mombassa’s port in Kenya required huge amounts of money lent by the China Eximbank, the China Development Bank (CDB), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and some Chinese private companies attached to the government.

To go further, in Central Africa, the tendency would be to pay this kind of big works in oil and other natural resources over long periods. This argument is particularly illustrated by an approach conducted by the China Eximbank that is called: “Angolan financing”. It allows African governments to enter into agreements under an infrastructure program financed and carried out by the Chinese, provided that they receive licenses for the exploitation of oil, gas, mining and agri-food projects (Jacquemot, 2018). These African countries, that fall again in the debt trap without a long-term economic strategy, are likely to be forced to accept agreements that will jeopardize their sovereignty and condemn them to play the role of raw material suppliers forever. And this scenario could become real if they continue to multiply bond loans to finance useless and secondary projects. Let’s take the case of Gabon that would have borrowed 219 billion FCFA from the Chinese in 2015 in order to prepare the African Cup of Nations scheduled for 2017 (Mouissi, 2016). In this kind of situation, when the event is over, the sports infrastructure then become monuments that open their doors only for activities unable to create local wealth. Unfortunately, many African

³The Gunboat Diplomacy consisted of firing from the sea to the shores of states that did not pay their debts. This diplomacy was practiced during the era of Theodore Roosevelt to protect American interests abroad by the threat of the use of Hard Power.

⁴A term used by the Americans that refers to the geopolitical strategy of ensuring the security of its supplies in the Indian Ocean.

leaders often like to build large buildings in their names without worrying about the real needs of their people. We can mention as an example the Nova Cidades of Kilamba in Angola built by the China International Trust and Investment Corporation (CITIC). It is a luxurious ghost town that does not fit with the local economic reality. So, the kinds of constructions usually lead officials to mortgage the natural resources that their country has, ignoring that their successors and future generations will have to suffer (**Figure 1**).

On this map, it can be seen that this stadium phenomenon is not necessarily sporadic. Built or renovated, all of these sports infrastructure are concentrated in the countries that are rich in raw materials such as Angola (crude oil); Gabon (crude oil); Cameroon (crude oil); Ghana (oil); Niger (uranium); Tanzania (gold); South Africa (gold) and Mauritania (iron ore) where China is disputing market shares with France and the United States of America. This also led some experts to accuse China of practicing a “stadium diplomacy” to finance white elephants with relatively low and accessible terms of borrowing. It is in this context that Sam Parker and Gabrielle Chefitz think: “These terms are particularly appealing to economically weaker countries less able to access international financing and to corrupt or authoritarian leaders looking for political legitimacy and personal financial gain. These politicians have tended to sign opaque contracting and financing arrangements on projects of questionable economic viability knowing they will be out of office long before the bill comes due” (**Parker & Chefitz, 2018**).

All these kinds of diplomacy, linked to the African debt, could be assimilated to the debtbook diplomacy that worries the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB).



Figure 1. Made in China Sports Stadiums’ Map, a. Afrique, La Tribune (**Bayo, 2017**).

Table 1. Debtbook west: string of pearls.

Country	Desirability for PRC	Value for U.S.	Long-term Debt Trends	Debtbook Progression	Balance of Relations	Overall Concern
<i>Debtbook West: String of Pearls</i>						
Pakistan	3.5	5	4.5	4	4.5	4.3
Djibouti	3	4	5	5	2.5	3.9
Sri Lanka	4	2.5	4	4.5	4	3.8
Malaysia	5	3	2	3	4	3.4
Myanmar	4	3	3	3	4	3.4
Thailand	3	2.5	2	1	2	2.1
Kenya	2	2	2	1.5	2.5	2

a. Sam Parker and Gabrielle Chefitz, *Debtbook Diplomacy: China's Strategic Leveraging of its Newfound Economic Influence and the Consequences for U.S. Foreign Policy*, Harvard Kennedy School, Working Paper, 2018.

3.2. The African Debt: Reasons of an Increase

In the line of the former South African President Thabo Mbeki in 2006, Christine Lagarde, IMF director recently told China's partners that the financing should not be considered as "a free lunch." And the CEO of Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC), Ray Washburne, to add: "Instead of giving them a fish, we want to teach them how to fish [...]. They'll have to stand on their own two feet. So, we're not in making loans or doing projects that don't make economic sense" (Bavier, 2018).

Westerners hope to raise awareness among Africans about the risks of conducting business with the Middle Kingdom, because in 1996 they launched the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative. This program was designed to reduce the debt of underdeveloped countries. African States therefore had to liberalize their economies in order to benefit from the Multilateral Debt Relief Initiative (MDRI) launched in 2005 by the G8 of Glen Eagles. The most serious countries enjoyed the cancellation of their debts with the IMF, the WB and the African Development Bank (AfDB). This allowed them to access both the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPA), which authorizes free trade with the European Union, and the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), which authorizes the export of certain African products towards the American market (Le Monde diplomatique, 2015). However, this aid and these opportunities are only available to those who respect the specific conditions established during the "Washington Consensus"⁵.

Meanwhile, the "Cotonou Agreement", which governs cooperation between Africa and the European Union until 2020, had increased austerity measures and

⁵The Washington Consensus represents the diplomacy and Western development model including free trade, the fight against corruption, transparency, civil rights, democratization, good governance, human rights ... Originally written by John Williamson in 1990, the whole is a set of measures applied by the IMF and the WB that are supported by the U.S. Treasury.

economic sanctions against states that do not want to have good governance. In other words, there would be no more money for the “rogue states”. This is the main reason that pushed African leaders to climb on the dragon’s back. Tired of suffering political and economic pressures and frequently facing civil wars because of Western interference in their politics, they had no other choice at the moment. Indeed, this feeling of being free, but chained to the old global economic order has never really allowed them to access international markets.

The arrival of Chinese money on the scale was a real breath of fresh air for several African presidents who were convinced and seduced by Chinese diplomacy and development strategy. They were different and seemed more accommodate to the needs of the continent. It was at that time that people started to talk about a “Beijing Consensus”⁶.

Basically, China did not want to interfere in the internal affairs of African countries. It played the card of a common history. The oppressed nation that has successfully risen and that would help all states which are facing the same situation in mutual respect. This aspect is also present in the Zhou Enlai’s era. During an African tour of 3 months between 1963 and 1964, the former Chinese prime Minister gained the confidence of the locals through a speech in Accra where he listed the 8 main principles of Chinese diplomacy for economic aid and technical assistance to other countries: equality and mutual benefit in providing aid to other countries; respect of sovereignty for the recipient countries; provide aid in the form of interest-free or low-interest loans and extends the time limit for the repayment; help recipient countries to improve self-reliance and independent economic development; build projects which require less investment while yielding quicker results; offer the best equipment made in China; foster technology transfer; same standard of living for Chinese and local experts (Enlai, 1964).

It is therefore no surprise that China became the preferred creditor of the continent, which was much more in need of money than of paternalistic moral lessons to build infrastructure able to support its development. Since 2011, these loans have resulted in an increase in average net inventories of the public debt and reached 53% of GDP and more in 2017 according to Standard & Poor’s, a rating agency. In 2000, international institutions were still able to reduce net inventories by more than 100% of GDP to 24% of GDP on average in 2008 and 18% in 2011 (Linge, 2018). For us, these arguments explain why Westerners are accusing China to perform a debtbook diplomacy or debt-trap diplomacy in many African countries.

3.3. The African Debt: A Disturbing Subject

The western accusations became somehow more consistent when the Malaysian

⁶The “Beijing Consensus” represents the diplomacy and development model proposed by China to developing areas including Africa. It includes non-interference, friendship, mutual respect, structural development ... The idea of a Beijing consensus opposing the Washington Consensus was first issued by Joshua Cooper Ramo in 2004.

Prime Minister, visiting Beijing in 2018, stated that he did not want to borrow money from China to finance constructions for the new silk road. Mahathir Mohamad refused to start a project that his country would not be able to pay in long-term and did not want to be a victim of “neocolonialism”. This term often used by the European media to demonize Chinese actions around the world has therefore resurfaced. And the Americans, who are always waiting for the slightest mishap of the Asian giant, have seized the case.

From the time when former U.S. secretary of state, Hilary Clinton, visited Zambia in 2011 to the one when Rex Tillerson was on an African tour in 2017 to catch up on the abusive remarks of U.S. President, Donald Trump, calling African countries as “shithole countries”, the message and purpose have not changed: China is unreliable and its aid is treacherous (Tillerson, 2018). Therefore, China is slowing down the African manufacture; spilling poor quality products in Africa; exploiting African workers; increasing the unemployment rate by importing its workforce; destroying the African environment and ecosystem through abusive or illegal industrial and agricultural activities; plundering natural resources; encouraging corruption by haggling with dictators and even redeeming land to neo-colonize Africa. “Between 2011 and 2017, global debt repayments reached 1.6 billion USD according to the IMF. From 2018 to 2023, African budget observers and analysts estimate that this African debt service will reach an average of 6.4 billion USD” (Linge, 2018).

Now that we have covered the issue on the famous debtbook diplomacy and its possible ramifications, it is time to ask whether all these accusations are relevant. Before condemning China and to refraining a blind unilateralism that deals only with one aspect of the matter, we will now explore a different angle of Chinese diplomacy that we will call “Diplomacy for Development”.

4. A Diplomacy for Development throughout Africa?

“No one who keeps himself in isolation on a single island will have a future. [...] The ocean is vast because it rejects no rivers”.

Xi Jinping (习近平), President of People’s Republic of China, FOAC 2018.

4.1. Chinese Misunderstood Achievements in Africa

Between 1978 and 2000, China turns in itself to focus more on its internal development by adopting a low profile. It was after this period of retreat that we have seen the Chinese increasingly participating in the process of globalization. Its economic and political influence now supports a new diplomacy that is becoming year after year like that of a superpower: “Da guojia waijiao 大国家外交”. Its return in Africa creates the worst fears, but as François Lafargue would say, the Chinese presence in Africa is a reality to be nuanced (Lafargue, 2009).

If we simply read the previous theory, any reader would think that China is the only one to make Africa indebted from North to South. And that the West would be the one trying to stop this financial hemorrhage by all means. Then, it

is easy to designate the oppressor and the savior, but when we think about it for a moment, the African continent was already indebted long before the Chinese come to invest massively. If the IMF and the WB generated restructuring programs for African economies, it would be fair to say that Europe and the United States are also responsible for the debt. These two institutions controlled by Westerners have forced many countries to pay sums with high interest rates every year in order to take advantage of raw materials. So, nations that claim to protect Africa have never really given it a chance to be a part of the international economic landscape.

The African 20th century was characterized by the assassination of politicians who were also fighting for democracy or the economic and political freedom of their populations: Sylvanus Olympio (Togo, 1963); Cyprien Ntaryamira (Burundi, 1994); Richard Ratsimandrava (Madagascar, 1975); Thomas Sankara (Burkina Faso, 1987); Laurent-Désiré Kabila (DRC, 2001); Teferi Bante (Ethiopia, 1977); François-Ngarta Tombalbaye (Chad, 1975); Mouammar Kadhafi (Libya, 2011) ... Whether you base your opinion on the conspiracy or the rationality, the West had something to do with their death. Its political interference has placed this part of the globe at the mercy of political tensions and coup d'état for countries that wanted to become self-sufficient and use their natural resources to develop for a long time. It was exactly during the same period that the overseas media continued to spread the image of a poor Africa all over the world. The Africans are killing each other, they are tribalists and look like animals. Starving orphans, raped women, buildings in ruins because of the repeated wars, Africans are cursed. And the West was there to help the victims through some governmental and non-governmental organizations. Behind this cliché, it would also be wise to recall that the money used to assist the disaster areas represents only a small part of what Africa pays each year. In other words, the continent gives without ever almost receiving (**Figure 2**).

As a result, when they accuse China of practicing a debtbook diplomacy in Africa, it is more than normal to have second thoughts. Even, when the theory based on this debtbook diplomacy suggests to us that the situation is catastrophic in the continent, we should nuance it. The African debt is not globally the most alarming if we take a closer look to GDP per net stock (although they are not always trustworthy, these numbers allow us to make a general assessment). Africa is placed on the top right. It is between Brazil and Australia on the figure below. As can be seen, the share of the African debt placed in a global context is not as high as they would like us to believe. The United States and Japan are the most indebted countries. Concerning the African continent, according to the debt barometer, we can notice that the majority of debts in this area are between 50% and 75% of GDP whereas some rare cases range from 75% to 100% and are dangerously close to 125%.

As the Chinese President recalled it during its FOCAC's opening speech in 2018, no country could survive in autarchy. The Chinese industry requisite raw

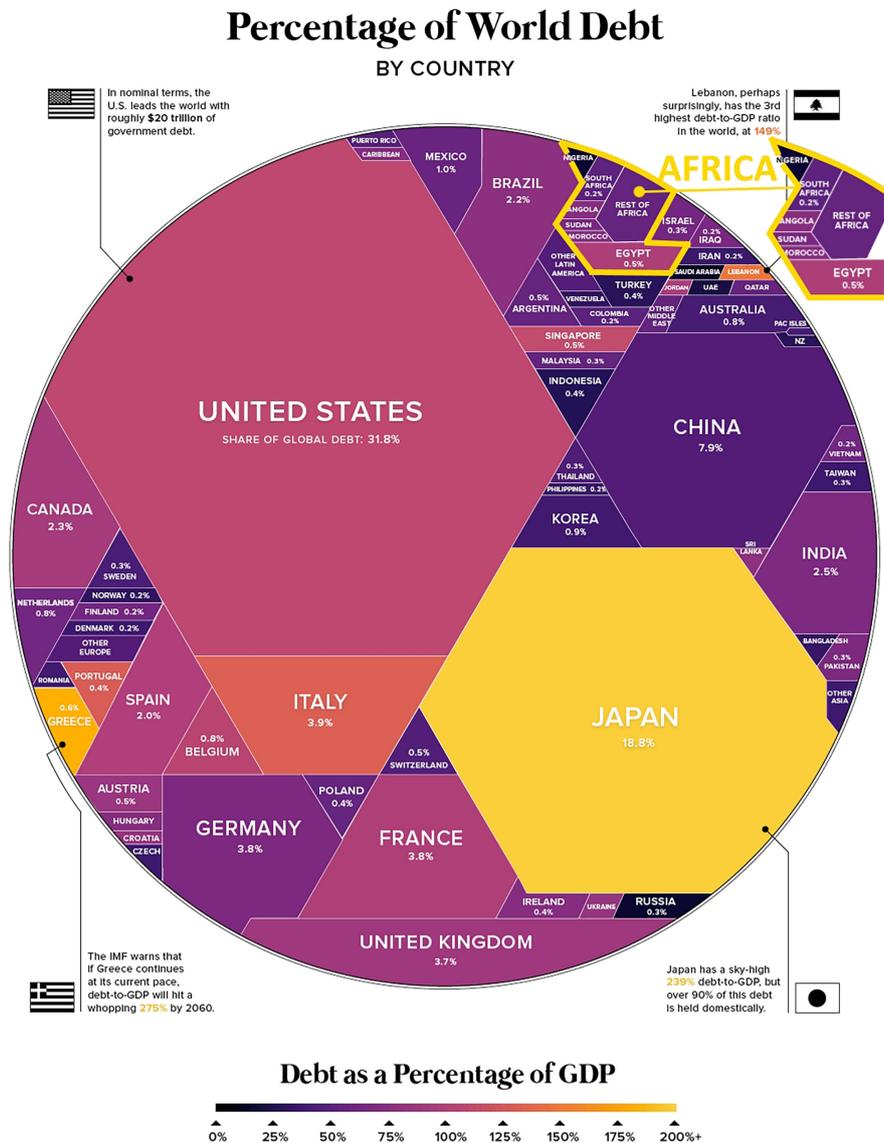


Figure 2. The Global Debt by GDP, b. United Nations of Debt by Visual Capitalist (Visual Capitalist, 2017).

materials to maintain its development and Chinese diplomacy requires the support of other nations in the major decisions taken at the United Nations (UN) to promote its foreign policy. In view of this, Africa appears as the continent capable of satisfying these two main necessities. Meanwhile, Africans also need money. This latter must be used to obtain economic and technical equipment in order to ensure their economic emergence. Now, until shown proof to the contrary, the Chinese are the only partners able and willing to grant large loans to Africa. Their presence has certainly increased the risk of financial crises in some countries, but the list is not long. The CARI at the Johns Hopkins University brings more detail on the famous book of debts. They discovered that: “Chinese loans are not currently a major contributor to debt distress in Africa. Yet many countries have borrowed heavily from China and others. Any new FOCAC loan

pledges will likely take Africa's growing debt burden into account" (Eom, Brautigam, & Benabdallah, 2018) (Table 2).

Table 2. African countries debt situation.

Country	In Debt Distress	High Risk of Debt Distress	China's Role in Debt Composition	Other Contributing Factors to Debt Distress
GROUP 1: CHINESE LOANS SMALL AS SHARE OF DEBT				
Burundi		x	Only four small loans	Conflict related economic collapse
Cape Verde		x	Holds less than 2% of debt	
Central African Republic		x		Conflict related economic collapse
Chad	x			Collapse in fuel prices, delayed policy response & real depreciation
Gambia		x	No loans as of 2017	
Mauritania		x		Collapse in fuel prices, delayed policy response & real depreciation
São Tomé and Príncipe	x			
South Sudan	x			Conflict related economic collapse
GROUP 2: CHINESE LOANS MORE SUBSTANTIAL SHARE OF DEBT				
Cameroon		x	Largest single creditor, holds less than 1/3 of total debt	
Ethiopia		x	US\$12.1 billion in loans since 2000	Also borrowed from the Middle East, World Bank, and others—total debt of US\$29 billion
Ghana		x	Less than US\$4 billion in loans	Total external debt approximately US\$29 billion
Mozambique	x		US\$2.3 billion in loans	Total debt over US\$10 billion
Sudan	x			Debt equally divided between Paris Club and non-Paris Club creditors
Zimbabwe	x		Holds 23% of debt	77% of debt owed to Paris Club & multilateral creditors
GROUP 3: CHINESE LOANS MOST SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTOR TO DEBT RISK/DISTRESS				
Djibouti		x	Holds 77% of debt	
Republic of Congo			We believe Congo holds at least US\$7.1 billion in Chinese debt	
Zambia		x	US\$6.4 billion in loans	Debt stock US\$8.7 billion at end of 2017

b. SAIS-China-Africa Research Initiative, Briefing Paper N°1, August 2018, p.3.

First, we will retain that since the year 2000, Ethiopia has borrowed at least 12.1 billion USD from China whereas its debt to the Middle East, WB and others, has reached 29 billion USD. Secondly, the Ghanaian foreign debt is approximately 25 billion USD, but the Chinese share is less than 4 billion. Thirdly, the Mozambique’s case is similar. The Chinese loans are only about 2.3 billion USD while the country’s public debt is 10 billion. It is all the same in Cameroon where China which is yet the country’s main creditor holds less than a third of the debts. Fourth, for Zimbabwe, 77% of the debt is owned by the Paris Club and the traditional partners. According to this group of researchers, the three most relevant examples that are exposed to risk of debt distress are countries where China is the biggest creditor. A situation has been summarized by the journal *Mail & Guardian* (Donnelly, 2018) (Figure 3).

This graphic clearly expresses that despite the fact China is lending billions to Africa each year, there are only three countries risk debt distress. Foremost, we have Zambia whose stock of debt was 8.7 billion USD in late 2017, stating that the country only borrowed 6.4 billion from China. Then, it is known that the Chinese hold 77% of the Djiboutian debt. Finally, the Congolese debt to China remains unclear (Eom, Brautigam, & Benabdallah, 2018). Now, according to John McCann’s artwork, the dragon is not as predatory as many would have us believe. Indeed, the left dragon supports Africa on his head and does multiple investments represented by the US dollar symbol (\$) in its mouth. The right dragon looks more predatory. However, you can notice something else. The representation of Africa in its mouth has been reduced to indicate that the threat is not important (yet). In sum, both illustrations are more or less predatory, but the left dragon represents a “development partner” (Alden, 2008) whereas the right dragon represents a risk.

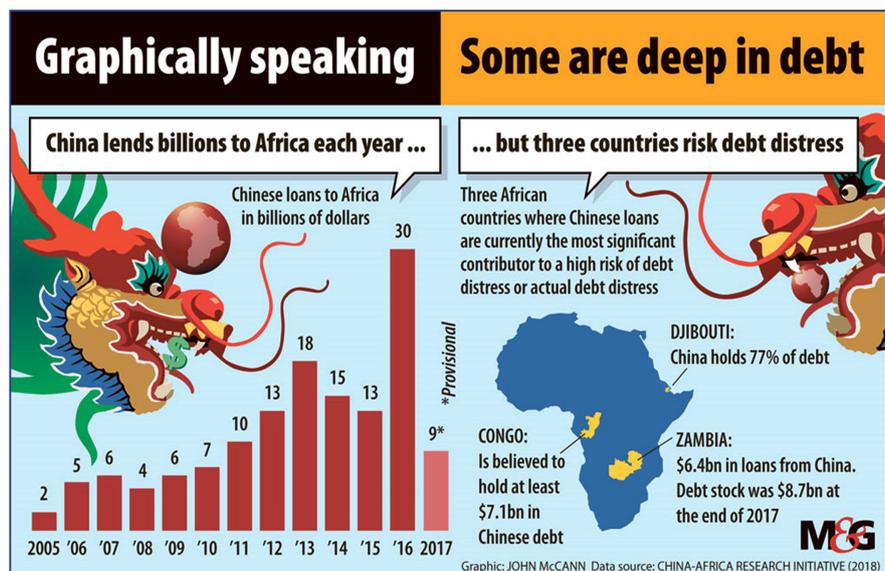


Figure 3. The Dragon in Africa, c. Mail & Guardian, graphic by John McCann and data by SAIS—China-Africa Research Initiative, 2018.

Accusing China of increasing African debt is to purport that the international oil crisis between 2014 and 2016 never existed. This recession obliged many oil-exporting countries, which relied on the stability of black gold, to bail out their treasuries with bond loans. And China was there when the IMF's economic sanctions and its restrictive restructuring plans blocked access to money. That is why Ms. XuJinghu, special envoy for Africa of the Chinese Government said that the debt issue in Africa is "complex": "If we take a closer look at these African countries that are heavily in debt, China is not their main creditor. [...] We need to take into account the fluctuations of the international economic situation, which has raised the cost of financing for these African countries, and most of them depend on exporting raw materials, the price of which, on the international market, has been falling" (Blanchard & Shepherd, 2018).

The Senegalese president also defended Chinese diplomacy by declaring at a conference that everything that was done with Beijing was under control and that included debt. For its part, the President of South Africa mentioned that the greatest achievement of the Sino-African Summit of 2018 was the desire to increase Africa's value-added exports to China (Al Jazeera, 2018). Speaking of this summit, the Chinese President has also taken the opportunity to reaffirm the "five-no" approach that governs China's foreign policy in Africa: no interference in African countries' pursuit of development paths that fit their national conditions; no interference in African countries' internal affairs; no imposition of our will on African countries; no attachment of political strings to assistance to Africa; and no seeking of selfish political gains in investment and financing cooperation with Africa (Xinhua, 2018). As you can see, several government officials from Africa and China recently tried to clarify the situation of the African debt. And we think that the main reason behind this press offensive is to eliminate another big issue directly attached to the debtbook diplomacy. As a matter of fact, it is widely believed right now that everything done by China in Africa leads to a new form of colonialism instead of development, hence our interest for the next point.

4.2. Is Debtbook Diplomacy Promoting Neocolonialism in Africa?

The term "neocolonialism" often comes up in Western statements to talk about China in Africa. When Kwame Nkrumah used it for a speech, he was referring to the postcolonial domination maintained by some superpowers (Nkrumah, 1965). France in particular had an important position in Africa to support political regimes that were favorable to its multinationals which the most famous is probably ELF now renamed Total. The neocolonialism can be defined as the foreign policy that a former imperialist power deploys in one or more colonies through political, economic and military levers that help it to increase its influence and domination as long as possible. It is in this context that François Xavier Verschave said: "Africa was divided into a rich and poor center in order to facilitate the complete intervention of the neocolonialism. Today, wars often happen

in Africa. For the last fifteen years, the fire of war has affected 32 of the 53 African countries. Between 1950 and 1989, some major Western countries provided 15 billion USD to improve the African military and educational fields, precluding to today's conflicts. From 1991 to 1995, they once again increased military assistance to 50 African countries, mingling with some regional wars, causing millions of deaths and millions of refugees. Among these wars and plagues, where does China appear?" (Verschave, 2004).

China has therefore never practiced colonization in Africa. And given to their new aspirations in foreign policy, it is very difficult to imagine the Chinese sabotaging their own national image in front of other players in the international system. However, like all nations that want to increase their power, there is a risk of hegemony, but it is still too early to draw conclusions at that level. In Africa, the Chinese are there to do business with everyone. If we compare Western and Chinese approaches to economic implementation, we can note that both models offer services for raw materials. So, if there is a neocolonialist China, there will automatically be also a neocolonialist France, a neocolonialist America, and so on. The debate cannot be carried out in one way, because companies like Sinopec, Total, Chevron and others have almost the same *modus operandi* in Africa. Nevertheless, Cyril Ramaphosa thinks that "In the values that it promotes, in the manner that it operates, and the impact it has on African countries, FOCAC refutes the view that a new colonialism is taking hold in Africa, as our detractors would have us believe" (CGTN Africa, 2018).

And according to Deborah Brautigam, the American politicians—who are part of these detractors—have not yet understood the Chinese presence in Africa. She is a member of the CARI, an American research group which has found that approximately 95.5 billion USD between 2000 and 2015 have provided funding for infrastructure. All of it has greatly improved the living conditions of African populations and created employment. Apart from this, the researchers also spent three years traveling to Madagascar, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Zambia in order to determine if the information that the Chinese were deporting African peasants and buying up their land were accurate. The truth is that the Chinese companies currently hold only 240, 000 hectares, or 4% of the numbers conveyed by the international media (Brautigam, 2018).

For Walter Rodney, the goals of a colony are to increase the influence of the motherland; supply raw materials to the motherland; provide an available market for the motherland's products; provide a space where its people can settle if the motherland is overcrowded. Theoretically, Chinese diplomacy and its economic progress could be easily assimilated to these principles, but in a practical way, China takes actions that contradict partly them. The fact that the United Nations Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, was present at the FOCAC 2018 proves something. China wants to send a message to Westerners. It is not by accident that the Chinese president has renewed an envelope of 60 billion USD for the African continent. This financial support will be available in several forms

and will include 15 billion USD of grants, interest-free loans, concessional loans followed by debt exemptions for some Africa's least developed countries and heavily indebted countries (Xinhua, 2018). So far, these acts contradict the basic definition of neocolonialism and allow more opportunities for economic development in the continent.

4.3. The African Development: An African Responsibility

Debtbook diplomacy or debt-trap diplomacy is one of the main issues opposing the West to China. After exploring the question from different angles, we will now proceed with a more personal and interpretative analysis. In our opinion, the thesis arguing that China would lead such diplomacy in Africa is a house of cards. It falls into ruins after a thorough research. Indeed, most of the accusations that target Beijing are mostly based on conspiracy theories and speculations. The Asian giant is overturning the balance of power because it is financially stronger than France or the United States at the moment. Historically, China has not increased indebtedness in Africa for many years. Men lie, but numbers do not lie. It is true that China is investing and lending more money to Africa than the West. Nonetheless, we must always remember that the Chinese are doing so much more in Asia and elsewhere in the world. Traditional partners know it, but seeing a developed Africa and a more powerful China does not serve their national interests best. That is why they are using the latest tools of their Soft Power in African countries namely culture and politics influence to curb the approximation of these two areas in the process of development. So, these kinds of tactics are made to maintain the current global economic order which is more likely to enrich the rich and impoverish the poor.

We believe that China is the economic partner best suited to African needs, but we must not forget that it is also looking for benefits. Charity and philanthropy have no place in the business world. They are useless in the diplomatic world either. Africans who continue to think that they will be saved without participating in the development of their country are wrong and do not also grasp the essence of the Chinese presence. In this cooperation, all is about a mutual benefit. The win-win cooperation exists to serve this purpose. However, if African States still be unable to take advantage of half (50%) of the benefits generated during this cooperation, it is because they have long sung like "Grasshoppers" while their Chinese friends continued to work like "Ants"⁷. This allegorical comparison refers to all those African leaders that did not liberalize and diversify their economies during the auspicious periods. Even today for many researchers, it is always hard to know what they are really looking for.

Time has come for the disillusion. As African, we cannot continue to complain about a Win-Lose situation with China or another foreign partner. We are, first and foremost, responsible of our own development. China is not the long-awaited savior of Africa. However, the Middle kingdom creates both com-

⁷Read one of the fables of Jean de La Fontaine: "The Grasshopper and the Ant".

petition and cooperation among all the partners present on the continent in various fields. Of course, this has the immediate impact of stimulating economic development, what never really happened since decolonization. As for the accusations towards Beijing, we must be objective. One part is true, but again we believe that Chinese diplomacy obeys a Darwinian logic. It adapts to survive. The Chinese lived reclusive in their countries for several centuries. Sometimes, we cannot blame them for ignoring how to proceed with Africans. To err is human and they are no exception to the rule. At every FOCAC, despite the high rate of criticism, they show pragmatism and a craze that the West has never shown in front of Africans as far as anybody knows. As we already pointed out in our first article (Niambi, 2018), we hope that the Chinese are working slowly, but surely to make China-Africa cooperation a more proletarian cause through “legitimate investments”. In this regard, Ms. XuJinghu promised: “As it pushes forward with Xi’s pledge, China will use feasibility studies to select projects that help African countries achieve sustainable development and steer clear of debt or financial woes” (Blanchard & Shepherd, 2018). Now that they seem to be motivated by this will, it would be very interesting to see what will happen in the coming years before the next Sino-African Summit.

Finally, we will say that the fate of Africans rests on their shoulders. To this end, we propose three resolutions which could provide potential solutions. To benefit efficiently from the relations with China, the African Union—the largest institution on the spot—could establish a series of reforms to which all of its members should comply. Therefore, we will advise on the reforms made by Africans for Africans:

- First resolution: All countries should fight corruption at the level of local administration and international trade. Indeed, as long as the culture of bribery continues, the results of development will be reduced;
- Second resolution: Reorganize public treasuries in all countries. African governments need to learn how to save money for their future generations and avoid squandering their resources during times when the price of the oil barrel is advantageous. This awareness will prevent both financial crises and social implosions, because peace throughout the entire African territory is a guarantee to attract more and more investors;
- Third resolution: Privatize state institutions that do not provide enough local wealth. In the same vein, the states must improve the business environment and set up fair conditions for small and large economic operators. This implies lightened tax laws, because we have personally found that foreigners are like kings in Africa. They come when they want, go where they want and do what they want in countries where the law and corrupt leaders protect them at the expense of the local population.

In the end, Africans must require knowledge and technology transfer from China every time they have a partnership together. They must also seriously start to learn how to transform and exploit their own raw materials. And, they must

pave the way for a great era of industrialization as it was the case during the 19th century in Europe. We sincerely believe that if such resolutions could be taken, there would be more jobs available and this would significantly reduce the migratory flows of Africans trying to cross the Mediterranean hoping to have a better life abroad.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of African debt—illustrated by the numbers and the data obtained by the researchers mentioned in this article—shows that China-Africa relations may look closer to what we took the liberty of calling “diplomacy **for** development”. We made the choice of “**for**” instead of “**of**” because it promotes the emergence of new development prospects for Africa. However, it does not necessarily guarantee a direct access to its development. Certainly, China has a share of responsibility in the African debt, but it is not the only one in that case. The dragon should not be considered as the unique source of any problems. Indeed, not all accusations about its real intentions on the continent are true. For us, a lot of those critics are more based on fear and jealousy than on objectivity. The West has selective memory when it comes to cooperation. History tells us that France, the United States and other European countries have had and still maintain relations with African regimes that are far from being perfect models of democracy simply because of raw materials. China, for its part, is acting the same, but providing more leeway to African countries where it intervenes. To accuse the Chinese of destroying everything in their path, without proof and on the basis of assumptions, is unfair.

For us, China and Africa are like Yin and Yang, the two complementary parts described in Chinese philosophy. If Africa is in the shadow of development, then China represents the sun able to highlight it. The big question is whether Africa is ready to receive all the opportunities created by Chinese diplomacy, because even in complementarity and mutual benefit, it seems to be certain inequality there. In this competitive and cooperative context, how do Africans benefit from their economic exchanges with foreign actors? It is sure that the African continent will continue to go into debt with the Chinese funders. It's mandatory and inevitable. Nevertheless, this situation will not last forever and there is already a slowdown. For once, Africa is free to choose its own model of development to get out of poverty. But if the continent has no long-term economic plan and diplomatic strategy, the danger of debt distress is still possible. In this situation, we risk seeing the grasshopper knocking again at the door of the ant to ask for help. And everybody knows how the story ends in the fable version of La Fontaine. All in all, our article has been written on the need to determine the place that China occupies in the African debt since it has been recently accused of conducting a debt book diplomacy throughout Africa. However, it would definitely be very interesting to address some important questions about the Chinese foreign direct investments (FDI) in the continent, their use, their impact on de-

velopment and the African strategies employed to reimburse all the debts. This is also something that other Asians actors such as Japan, India, South Korea, Turkey, etc. are doing on the spot nowadays.

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