

REVIEW:
***Ardent to be
Understood.***

***A Collection of Speeches, Articles and Remarks by
His Excellency Lin Songtian, China's Ambassador***

(Embassy of the People's Republic of China in South Africa: Pretoria, 2019)

By Emmanuel Matambo

In 2019, the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in South Africa compiled a collection of 28 speeches made by Lin Songtian, China's ambassador to South Africa. According to the Embassy, this collection was gathered 'in order to promote mutual understanding on China, South Africa and their relations and policies' and to help readers 'gain a better understanding of China, China-South Africa and China-Africa relations' (p. i). Ambassador Lin Songtian is a seasoned Chinese envoy to Africa who over the past 20 years has worked in Zambia, Liberia, Malawi and now South Africa. An animated orator, Lin is committed to deepening Sino-African relations. One of the aims of his mission in South Africa is to ensure that Chinese entrepreneurs, academics and others in a position of financial strength commit themselves to providing scholarships for deserving South African students to study in China. Read within this context, the speeches compiled in the catalogue under review appear to come from a man who not only strives to fortify Sino-African relations, but who is also acutely aware of the onerous task of convincing Africans that China has benign intentions towards Africa. Upon arrival in South Africa to commence his current responsibility, Ambassador Lin told his audience about how, during his previous responsibilities in China and Africa, he 'spared no efforts to promote the upgrading of China-Africa friendly and mutually beneficial cooperation' (p.25).

This review will first present a summary of the speeches and then offer an appraisal. The 28 speeches are divided into four chapters. The first chapter, comprising 13 speeches, includes those that address China-South Africa and China-Africa relations. Though formalised just a little over 20 years ago, China-South Africa relations have grown tremendously, both in terms of economic ties and political leanings. The two countries seek to deepen 'political mutual trust, mutually beneficial cooperation, people-to-people friendship, and international coordination' (p.54). China is currently South Africa's largest source of foreign investment. As Lin notes, 'In 2017 bilateral trade grew by 11.7% to 39.17 billion US dollars, a more than 20-fold increase from the figure at the beginning of diplomatic relations' (p. 12). President Xi Jinping has visited South Africa perhaps more than any other country and Lin states that in January 2018, President

Xi Jinping and South Africa's former President Jacob Zuma 'held nine bilateral meetings' (p. 3). Ambassador Lin describes China as 'a reliable, productive, beneficial partner to South Africa' (p. 11). Sino-South African relations are evidenced in the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), the economic bloc comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). No other country on the African continent is connected with China to this extent.

Yet, the growth of China-South Africa relations is proportionate to the deepening relationship between Africa and China. In 2000, at the formation of FOCAC, Sino-African trade was only \$10 billion. In 2017, it stood at \$170 billion. Chinese investment in the same timeframe increased from \$1 billion to over \$100 billion. However, China-South Africa relations are not spared the criticism that is usually levelled against China-Africa relations. Thus, observers and interested parties have been split into Sino-optimists and Sino-pessimists. State actors from both China and Africa have had to dispel rumours that the China-Africa nexus portends disaster for Africa and is characterised by duplicity on the part of China. One such rumour, which the ambassador tackles, was an article that was published in *Le Monde*, a French newspaper, that claimed that China was wiretapping information from the Chinese-built African Union (AU) Headquarters in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. To rebut such rumours, Lin, like many politicians from Africa and China, explained China's history of solidarity with Africa – one that extends from the Cold War. For instance, the Tanzania-Zambia Railway (TAZARA), which was built with Chinese funds and labour from Zambia's Kapiri Mposhi district to the port of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, stands today as an iconic manifestation of China's commitment to Africa's struggle against colonial and settler dependency, even though 65 Chinese nationals perished during its construction.

Apart from wistful references to past commitments as a way of refuting negative reportage on current China-Africa relations, African and Chinese media can play a significant role. Shortly after taking up his position in South Africa, Lin gave a speech at the China-Africa Media Forum. He identified three roles that the

media can play in shaping perceptions of the China-Africa nexus. The first is promoting Sino-African friendship and safeguarding intersecting China-Africa interests. The second is to narrate stories that correlate with the real China-Africa amity, which can only be done when Chinese and African media organs have gained enough influence to rival dominant media houses that have global influence. The third role that the media can play, which is partly related to the first, is 'to identify opportunities of China-Africa cooperation, and promote our mutually beneficial cooperation' (p. 33).

An impressive litany of Chinese-sponsored infrastructure in Africa, including the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway, the Mombasa-Nairobi Railway, the Abuja-Kaduna Rail (in Nigeria) and a host of power plants, schools, sports stadiums and parliamentary buildings, enhances China's reputation as a dependable partner in building and improving infrastructure in Africa. President Xi Jinping told his envoys that, 'in conducting China's relations with Africa, we must adhere to the principles of sincerity, practical results, affinity and good faith and uphold the values of friendship, justice and shared interests' (pp. 7-8). Despite these assurances, Lin is still mindful of the fact that there will always be those who argue that China's intentions in Africa are not amicable. Yet the third FOCAC Summit of September 2018, held in Beijing, demonstrated that Sino-African relations are continuing in earnest. Indeed, the Summit was titled 'China and Africa: Toward an Even Stronger Community with a Shared Future through Win-Win Cooperation'. China has also pledged \$60 billion to Africa in terms of investment, loans and assistance.

The second chapter includes four speeches that address the BRI and BRICS. The year 2018 was particularly significant for China-South Africa relations as the two countries celebrated 20 years of formal recognition. Moreover, the tenth BRICS summit was held in July 2018 in South Africa, with President Xi Jinping in attendance. It is an open secret that China played a seminal role in South Africa's inclusion in BRIC, which happened in 2010. Lin states that, 'BRICS cooperation has transcended the old mentality of drawing lines according to ideology and has walked a path of mutual respect and common progress' (p. 73). BRICS represents

countries that have been described as 'emerging powers' with considerable influence in their respective regions, i.e. Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America. The five members also account for slightly over 40% of the global population.

Lin # also made note of how BRICS has contributed to issues beyond the scope of the five countries involved by working closely with, and within, bodies such as the United Nations and the G20 and by adhering to global targets, ranging from the Millennium Development Goals and the Sustainable Development Goals to combatting ecological hazards. In economic terms, BRICS posts some impressive figures: by 2018, the total GDP of BRICS had grown by a 179%, 'trade expanded by 94%, and urban population increased by 28%' (p. 79). To describe the symbiotic relationship that the BRICS countries have, Lin (p. 80) drew an analogy between the five BRICS members and the fingers of one hand: 'each one is different, but they all complement each other'.

The second part of the second chapter deals with the BRI, which was initially known as the One Belt One Road. The initiative was proposed in September and October of 2013 during Xi Jinping's visits to central and southeast Asia. The plan comprises two branches: the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), based on land, and the ocean-based Maritime Silk Road. President Xi explains that the BRI is modelled on the ancient Silk Road, which China's 'ancestors, driven by a desire for friendship, opened ... and thus started a great era of exchanges among civilizations' (Xi, 2017: 93). One of the fabled expeditions in China's long history of reaching out to other parts of the world was headed by Zheng He, a legendary voyager whose expeditions reached the eastern coast of Africa. Chinese voyagers brought with them porcelain, brands of tea and silk products, and took back with them African products and reportedly, a giraffe. Like many other people who have drawn comparisons between Chinese and Western incursions into Africa, Lin (p. 85) states that 'Unlike the Western colonialists, the Chinese never used force to conquer or bully anyone, occupy a single inch of land of any other country'. This fact should disabuse concerns that China could use the BRI initiative as a colonial belt, created by binding those signing onto the project.

Moreover, during the Sixth Ministerial Conference of the China Arab States Cooperation

Forum in June 2014, Xi (2018:3 48) asserted that the BRI is a channel:

towards mutual benefit which will bring about closer economic integration among countries involved, promote development of their infrastructure and institutional innovation, [and] create new economic and employment growth areas.

Even more laudable was Xi's conviction that through the interconnectedness that the BRI will facilitate and hopefully nurture, 'exchange will replace estrangement, mutual learning will replace clashes and coexistence will replace a sense of superiority' (2017: 86). It must be encouraging to China that by late 2018, 37 African countries had entered into a number of BRI agreements with China. Whether the whole African continent will fully embrace the BRI is unclear, as there are no geographical or ideological preclusions as to who can take part. What is certain is that the initiative will proceed, with the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank and the Silk Road Fund on hand to provide the needed revenue.

The penultimate chapter presents Xi Jinping's thoughts on Chinese development and human rights and comprises seven speeches. In October 2017 the Communist Party of China (CPC) held its 19th National Congress in Beijing, where it analysed how far China has come since the economic reforms of 1978. The CPC acknowledged that economic reforms and successes have encouraged an evolution in the development and demands of citizens. Whereas previously Chinese citizens were more interested in securing material and cultural needs, they now have 'ever-growing needs for a better life' (p. 97), which manifest in the demand for balanced growth. The congress set for itself ambitious targets such as completely obliterating poverty by the year 2020 and reaching \$10,000 in per capita GDP. It is noteworthy that by end of 2018 per capita GDP had already reached \$9,700 and is thus poised to meet the 2020 target.

One of the growing preoccupations of the Chinese government is a people-centred approach to growth, development and international relations. This concern has been evidenced through, for instance, taking an unwavering anti-corruption stance, promoting environmental protection and securing food safety. It is Lin's assessment that these efforts have won the CPC support among

Chinese citizens. Beyond China's borders, the Chinese government has committed itself to promoting a new type of international relation and a community based on a shared future for humankind. This ideal future can only be fashioned through a brand of international relations that genuinely demonstrates 'mutual respect, fairness, justice and win-win cooperation' (p. 100). By mutual respect, China means recognition that national and territorial sovereignty are sacrosanct and that the diverse interests and civilisations found in the international system deserve the respect of all players involved. China's notion of fairness and justice in the international system is premised on bolstering the representation and influence of developing countries in forums such as the United Nations and other multilateral structures that have hitherto only allowed limited input from the developing world. Win-win cooperation essentially means tying China's development to that of its partners, which is done through initiatives such as the BRI. Another ideal of this type of cooperation is to diminish the economic gulf between the Global North and the Global South. China has vowed to increase its development assistance to the developing world, particularly the least developed countries.

This school of thought tries to adapt socialism with Chinese characteristics in the 21st century. One of the core features of Xi Jinping's mission is to strengthen the leadership of the CPC and ensure 'that the Party exercises effective self-supervision and practices strict governance in every respect' (p. 105). The second aspect, already mentioned above, is adopting a people-centred approach. In undertaking its responsibilities, the Party is thus enjoined to have the people as its priority. It is for this reason that China seeks to eliminate poverty by 2020. Later in the chapter, Lin articulates human rights in basic practical terms, referring to people's access to food, shelter, work and medical attention (p. 130). The third major defining feature of Xi Jinping's goal is to build a beautiful world, replete with harmony and profound interconnectedness.

For the remainder of the third chapter, Ambassador Lin's speeches reiterate the impressive growth that China has undergone since 1978, when the country was mostly reliant on subsistence farming. Currently, China is a moderately affluent society, whose people have

an average life expectancy of about 76 years. Opening up to the world after centuries of isolation and 'false pride' (p. 112) have undoubtedly contributed to China's remarkable growth. For example, since joining the World Trade Organisation (WTO), China's tariffs were reduced from 15.3% to 9.8%. It is thus not surprising that the country seeks even deeper integration with other countries. The China International Import Expo, held in November 2018 in China, was aimed at demonstrating China's 'firm resolve and sincere wishes to further opening up, to share development results with the world and to realize common development' (p. 118).

The final four speeches are provided in the chapter titled 'Wildlife Protection'. One of the resolutions to emerge from the CPC's 19th Congress was a commitment to foster accord between human life and nature. Unity of the universe is one of the basic tenets of Chinese culture. As President Xi Jinping asserted, a 'sound ecological environment is the most equal public good and offers the most universal public welfare' (p. 141). In 2014, the purchase and consumption of wildlife was criminalised. Ivory trade has been one of the blights on China's image in Africa. Because ivory artisanship 'has lasted for tens of centuries' (p. 138) in China, it was a difficult decision for the Chinese government to rule that by 31 December 2017, it would cease the sale and processing of ivory. In South Africa, Chinese nationals are always reminded on their arrival that they should not indulge in the 'illegal purchase or transportation of ivory and other wild animals and plants and their products' (p. 138).

In the quest to demonstrate its resolve to curb the illegal trade of wild animals and products, in 2014 and 2015 the Chinese government publicly destroyed tons of ivory. A regrettable reality is that despite these measures, there are still Chinese nationals who are involved in smuggling and trading wildlife products – a fact of which Lin is aware. Working in concert with South Africa, the United States and the International Criminal Police Organisation (Interpol), China 'carried out three anti-smuggling endangered species activities code-named "operation COBRA", effectively curbing criminal activities such as smuggling ivory' (p. 139). The 2015 FOCAC Johannesburg Plan of Action unequivocally states that China

will help Africa with the protection of wildlife. The Plan of Action came a year after Chinese Premier Li Keqiang announced that China was putting \$10 million at the disposal of African countries to strengthen the protection of wildlife.

The collection of speeches portrays a character typical of a person who is aware of his/her divisive identity but is earnestly seeking understanding and acceptance from his/her partners. China's stupendous growth from 1978 will go down in political lore as a miracle by those who doubted China's capacity, but to the Chinese, probably as an achievement befitting an industrious and vastly populated 'middle kingdom'. From a per capita GDP of \$156 in 1978 to \$9,000 in 2017, with an average annual growth of 9.5%, the country managed to lift an approximately 700 million Chinese out of poverty. Over the past 70 years, China has developed from being a rural-based, third-world economy to be the second-largest economy in the world, the 'largest manufacturer, largest trading power of goods, the holder of the biggest reserve' and a popular investment and tourist destination (p. 59).

In contrast, a popular criticism levelled against the AU is that it is a talk shop, where much rhetoric is produced that does not translate into tangible results. To remedy this challenge, perhaps the AU and its members could learn from China's orientation towards practical results, a theme Lin mentioned numerous times in his speeches. For example, the Chinese government established the 'Secretariat of the Chinese Follow-up Committee on FOCAC' to 'facilitate coordination and implementation' (p. 22). Such initiatives compel China to be focused rather than setting targets in a desultory manner.

Although a close relationship between China and Africa offers many potential benefits, the temptation of both partners is to ignore the challenges and differences between the parties involved or to be lured into self-delusion. While it is heartening to hear Lin state that, 'China and all 54 African members participate in the FOCAC as equals' (p. 21), such an argument is not always realistic. The majority of African states are simply too small to interact with China from a position of invariable equality. Moreover, FOCAC is primarily China's initiative to which Africa has been invited. The ambassador, however, is

candid enough to accept that although the BRI belongs to the world, 'it begins with China' (p. 92). It is also important that, after colonialism, Africa has veto powers on whom it relates with and on what basis.

Indeed, during his visit to Djibouti, Kenya, Chad, Nigeria and Ethiopia, Former US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson warned Africa that it 'risked forfeiting' its sovereignty by entering into deals with China. In response, Lin expressed satisfaction that, despite Tillerson's warning, 'Africans are mature enough to engage in partnerships of their own volition, and that Africans are wise enough to who is their true friend and reliable development partner' (p. 38). More importantly, though, Mr Lin asserts that 'African people know all too well that if they are not independent economically, they will never be independent politically' (p.39). This statement could perhaps be taken to heart as Africa interacts with outside actors, even including China. Furthermore, China is a relatively new player in Africa and hence it is still yet to be assessed as to whether or not it contributes to building sustainable economic growth in Africa.

Another potential issue is that African countries risk not meeting their objectives to service debt. Under such circumstances, Africa will have to cede some ground to its debtors. Recently, anti-Chinese sentiment in Zambia, for example, has been stoked by rumours that the Zambian government is on the brink of losing state-owned enterprises to China because the country has failed to repay its debt to China. The Zambian government has been at pains to refute such rumours, without much success. It would thus serve China well that, in its dealings with Africa, it helps the continent to build capacity for financial independence. It is indeed possible that some of the airports that Mr Tillerson landed at during his ill-fated tour of Africa, which ended in Tillerson's sacking by President Trump, 'are loaned and built by China ... by the hands of the Chinese and the African people'. All this will fade into insignificance if African countries will not pay back the loans. Those who know about China's takeover of Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka will use that as a possible example of what could happen if African countries fail to meet their debt obligations to China.

Moreover, while China's growth remains an example not only to Africa, but to other players in

the international system that have a condescending and hypocritical views of Africa, African nations have to respond to the international system from an African perspective, rather than pandering to prescripts of outside players. China's emphasis on hard work, the rejection of protectionism and its accurate response to market economics have fostered the stupendous growth by which it is characterised. Yet Lin's emphasis on economic gains and material interpretations of human rights are, to some extent, at variance to what most of Africa committed itself after the Cold War. Neoliberalism places a high premium on individual rights and multiparty democracy. Thus, in this area, China does not offer an example to Africa. China's emphasis on sovereignty and non-interference will probably have to be revised. In its classic form, non-interference is an amoral principle that, in the face of blatant oppression, could give oppressors free reign to molest ordinary citizens. If Xi Jinping is to religiously adhere to a people-centred approach in international relations, then China will have to condemn systems that are undeniably a menace to people. However, China's call for a 'stronger representation and bigger voice of developing counties in the UN' (p.100) is consonant with the Ezulwini Consensus, a document by the AU calling for the reconfiguration of the United Nations Security Council to include at least-two permanent members from the African continent, appears to confirm China's pursuit of a just world order.

In sum, Lin's speeches are a sermon to the converted, as most of Africa has responded favourably to China's overtures. In order to forge an honest relationship, however, Africa and China should not mask the possible threats that Sino-Africa relations have. Debt dependency, for instance, is a real danger and the growing number of Chinese nationals in Africa whose interests and comportment might not accord with those of the Chinese government, might be a threat to China's reputation in Africa. Going forward, Lin should perhaps pay attention to this growing dimension of China-Africa relations, rather concentrating on elite-based relations in the main. ■

References

- Xi, J. (2017). *Important Speeches at the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation*. Beijing: Foreign Language Press.
 Xi, J. (2018). *The Governance of China*. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press.