

## África, China y el sentido de los datos digitales

## Africa, China, and the Meaning of Digital Data

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### RESUMEN

Los transhumanistas de silicio hablan mucho sobre las implicaciones de la digitalización, a través de la cual temas como la transferencia mental, una conciencia digital y también el argumento de la simulación se discuten frecuentemente. Desde una perspectiva pragmática ninguno de estos temas tiene alguna relevancia. Me parece que la siguiente pregunta es la más importante: ¿Cómo podemos recolectar y utilizar los datos digitales de una manera digital, puesto que los datos digitales son el nuevo petróleo? Desde hace tiempo que hemos observado una lucha global por los datos digitales. China parece tener las estrategias más prometedoras para recopilar datos digitales. Dado el enorme interés de China en determinados países africanos, es necesario analizar si este desarrollo beneficiaría a largo plazo a estos países. A diferencia de otros análisis que destacan los aspectos neocoloniales de este desarrollo, este artículo expone algunas razones por las que esta cooperación también podría ser de interés para los países mencionados.

*Palabras Clave:* digitalización; datos; China; África; Transhumanismo

### ABSTRACT

Silicon-based transhumanists talk a lot about the implications of digitalization, whereby topics like mind-uploading, a digital consciousness, as well as the simulation argument are discussed most often. From a pragmatic perspective none of these issues is of any relevance. It seems to me that the following question is the most central one: How can we collect and use digital data in a democratic manner, as digital data are the new oil? For quite some time, we have seen global fights for digital data. China seems to have the most promising strategies for gathering digital data. Given the enormous interest of China in selected African countries, it needs to be analysed whether this development is in the long-term interest of these countries. In contrast to other analyses who primarily stress the neo-colonial aspects of this development, this article reveals some reasons why this cooperation also could be in the interest of the countries mentioned.

*Keywords:* digitalization; data; China; Africa; transhumanism



Data are the new oil. This is not quite the case. Digital data are intellectual property, while oil is a natural resource. However, both entities are connected with financial gain, influence, and power. For quite some time, we have seen global fights for digital data. China seems to have the most promising strategies for gathering digital data. China created a digital firewall, which has destroyed the internet as a global entity. Inside China, China has the political right to gather all digital information, and they use it for their social credit system. Outside of China, digital data can be collected by means of Huawei, Ali Baba and Tik Tok. Digital data is relevant for financial, scientific, as well as technical flourishing. If digital data is the new oil, then it is difficult to imagine how any nation can stop China from becoming the economically most flourishing nation worldwide. Economic flourishing also plays a role for political influence, which goes along with military power.

This analysis has various implications. The salaries go up in China, and products can no longer be produced as cheaply, as it used to be the case, when China was still extremely poor, only a few decades ago. However, they focussed on innovation and the latest technologies, and were able to realize an enormous economic growth. Now, cheaper workers are needed in Chinese companies, lower energy costs, as well as reduced expenses for logistical purposes. All these goals can be realized in various African countries. The salaries are cheaper, the sun light can be used as an energy source, and the costs for transporting good to Europe are much lower than from China. In addition, many African countries have important natural resources to offer, too:

Over a third of China's oil comes from Africa, as does 20% of the country's cotton. Africa has roughly half of the world's stock of manganese, an essential ingredient for steel production, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo on its own possesses half of the planet's cobalt. Africa also has significant amounts of coltan, which is needed for electronics, as well as [half of the world's known supply of carbonatites](#), a rock formation that's the primary source of rare earths (Shepard, 2019)

It is a widely shared conception that the natural resources are the prime Chinese motivation when it comes to their interest in Africa, and again it is simply another story of

colonialism and exploitation. However, the issue is much more complex. The following insight needs to be noted:

the proportion of Chinese FDI<sup>1</sup> into mining (21 percent in 2020) is far lower than that of other countries such as U.K., France, and the U.S. (43 percent, 43 percent, and 37 percent in 2019 respectively) (Fu, 2021)

It is not the case that the natural resources do not play any role, but the other factors mentioned before, like cheaper work forces, play an at least as important role as the natural resources, if not a significantly more important one. To build and run companies, and to produce goods what is also needed is a developed infrastructure, and a high level of education. China is involved in many related projects:

The central players in many of Africa's biggest ticket infrastructure projects — including the \$12 billion Coastal Railway in Nigeria, the \$4.5 billion Addis Ababa–Djibouti Railway, and the \$11 billion megaport and economic zone at Bagamoyo — are being developed via Chinese partnerships (Shepard, 2019)

Education is another field which does not remain untouched by China. For a long time, it has been the case that “China also supported African countries that opted for communism and positioned itself as a global, moral role model” (Fredua-Kwarteng, 2020). Yet, it also needs to be noted that “since 2000 China's graduate scholarships and grants to Africans to study in its tertiary institutions have increased to about 61,000” (Fredua-Kwarteng, 2020).

Over the same period, China has increasingly made its presence in Africa more visible by establishing more than 54 Confucius Institutes (CIs) and 27 Confucius Classrooms (CCs) across the African continent, according to the 2018 edition of *Quartz Africa*. Both CIs and CCs are major instruments designed to promote Mandarin and Chinese culture in Africa.

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<sup>1</sup> Foreign direct investment.

The *South China Morning Post* reports that China has been highly successful in creating a cultural footprint across Africa, the world's fastest growing continent, through its Confucius Institutes. (Fredua-Kwarteng, 2020)

Furthermore, recent studies also support the judgement that the aspect of cheap renewable energy is also relevant for the Chinese to investing in various African countries:

One peculiarity of Africa's renewable-energy sector is the rapid increase and likely future growth of Chinese involvement in large-scale renewable-energy infrastructure projects. Insights from other infrastructure, utility and resource-extraction sectors in sub-Saharan Africa suggest that China is pursuing a specific Chinese model of investments characterised by enclave characteristics and including finance, turnkey project development and the importation of labour and equipment from China (Lema et al., 2021)

All the previously mentioned insights reveal a double-edged sword. On the one hand, what gets imported is the Chinese culture which implies hierarchical and paternalistic structures. The right of morphological freedom does not seem to receive any consideration within Chinese cultural structures. On the other hand, what seems to be promoted are a sustainable renewable energy sector, a functioning infrastructure which can bring about lasting changes, and most importantly an increased level of educational options. The realization of these changes might have a significantly stronger and lasting impact than the various development aid projects which Western countries have implemented in previous decades. If a complex infrastructure with a sustainable renewable energy sector can be realized, the foundation for a productive environment was realized. Due to the relevance of this sector for central global challenges like climate change, the options for exporting these technologies and further growth are enormous. Given the initial implementation of companies with the support of China, the possibility of local spin-offs can be realized, in particular if the educational sector

gets promoted further such that human resources are available which can bring about such projects and put together successful spin-off companies.

A challenge which remains is that of a cultural and financial dependency from China. Various African countries have already reacted to specific attempts of creating such dependencies, e.g.:

“It all started in July 2020 when a Kenyan high court ordered the cancellation of a USD 3.2 billion contract between Kenya and China for the construction of the Standard Gauge Railway, saying the project was “illegal” because the state-run Kenya railways failed to comply with the country’s procurement laws.

Also, Ghana last year scrapped a USD 236 million contract with Beijing Everyway Traffic and Lighting Tech company to develop an intelligent traffic management system, and the Democratic Republic of Congo is reviewing a USD 6 billion mining deal with Chinese investors, Reuters [reported](#) last month.” (International Institute for Sustainable Development, 2021)

At the same time, it must also be noted that a better infrastructure, a higher quality education, as well as functioning renewable energy sector would also go along with some social prerequisites which are of an enormous relevance for most human beings, e.g., a well-functioning health care sector. Most human beings identify an increased healthspan either intrinsically, or instrumentally with a better quality of life. It is actually the health sector in which there has already been a long-standing cooperation between China and various African countries:

“‘Health’ is one of the oldest forms of engagement between China and Africa, dating back to the 1960s, when the first Chinese Medical Teams arrived on the continent to provide direct care to African people, build local capacity, train healthcare personnel, and construct hospitals, ultimately serving as a **tangible expression of solidarity among developing countries** against colonial and imperialist powers. Health cooperation, at that stage, fed into China’s anti-imperialist discourse, helping Beijing to

consolidate its network of regional partners. When the first Forum on China-Africa Cooperation took place in 2000, showcasing China-Africa relations to the rest of the world, 'health' appeared in both the FOCAC Declaration and Action Plan (the two official documents issued after each FOCAC). Though the focus on the health sector appeared **rather limited in content and relatively low in the priority list** (the last of a 10-point statement), its **soft power dimension** - i.e., China's long-held solidarity towards Africa - was **crucial in counterbalancing the rise of a new, perhaps less benevolent, logic of interaction based on economic interests**, and achieving the associated foreign policy objectives." (Procopio & Sciorati, 2021)

This development has even been intensified in more recent times:

"Beijing managed to achieve a number of objectives during the Covid-19 pandemic, somehow reinforcing its health strategy. The distribution of vaccines exemplifies this: donations of Chinese vaccines to Africa are significantly [lower than commercial sales](#) (6.7 million donations versus 47.5 million vaccine purchases), but Africa remains the **second largest recipient of Chinese Covid-19 vaccine donations worldwide** (after the Asia Pacific region, which takes up to 65% of the total share), showing Beijing's commitment to help the continent. At the same time, out of the 33 million doses delivered to Africa thus far, half have gone to China's strategic allies, Morocco (16.5 million), followed by Zimbabwe (4.4), Egypt (4.1), and Algeria (1.8), with the delivery gaining momentum over the last few weeks." (Procopio & Sciorati, 2021)

By mentioning the vaccinations, I merely stress the Chinese interest in being connected to the African countries mentioned, the entanglement between China and Morocco and some other countries. It should not be much of a surprise that China is interested in Morocco, given the geopolitical importance of this country. It is connected to the Mediterranean Sea, as well as the Atlantic Ocean. If goods get produced there, or they arrive there from other African countries, they can easily be shipped further either to one of the Mediterranean countries or the Netherlands, the UK, and the Scandinavian countries. The goods can be produced cheaper due to lower salaries, renewable energies, as well as cheaper logistical costs. It makes an

enormous difference whether you have to transport tablets and smartphones from China to Europe or from Morocco.

From what we have realized in these reflections, there is a complex entanglement between China and various African countries which has been intensified significantly in most recent times. It is closely related to ethical, political and cultural issues concerning emerging technologies. There are several serious challenges which go along with these developments, which have to do with paternalistic structures. These are serious issues. Yet, it depends upon the force, and relevance of these structures on how problematic they are. However, given the relevance of technological innovations for the economic, political, and entrepreneurial flourishing of a country, an enormous potential for sustainable changes have to be noticed, too. Given the enormous relevance of digital data, and the variety of industries which are related to the processing of digital data, all these developments might promise a flourishing future for the countries in which these innovations get implemented.

Digital data are power, and the countries which manage to collect the data most efficiently seem to have the most promising outlook for a flourishing future. Silicon-based transhumanists talk a lot about the implications of digitalization, whereby topics like mind-uploading, a digital consciousness, as well as the simulation argument are discussed most often. All these topics are fun to talk about, and they can enable intellectuals to get a clearer understanding of who we are and how we relate to others. However, from a pragmatic perspective none of these issues is of any relevance. If one takes the issue that a sufficiently developed general AI will put humans into a zoo too seriously, it distracts us from being focussed on the philosophical issues which are of an enormous pressing relevance. It seems to me that the following question is the most central one: How can we collect and use digital data in a democratic manner, as digital data are the new oil? Data are of central relevance for scientific, technological, as well as political endeavours. It is already the case that Chinese scientists publish more peer-reviewed articles than US-American scholars (Tollefson, 2018). This is no surprise, as data are needed for studies in social sciences, the natural sciences, as well as engineering. China can collect data within China as well as outside of China. US American companies cannot collect the data so easily, as they cannot simply legally force people to share their data with them. This is the reason, why the financial, scientific, as well as political flourishing of China seems to be extremely likely in forthcoming times. Given the enormous

interest of China in selected African countries, it seems likely that it will have some promising spill-over effects for these countries concerning education, infrastructure as well as employment. These developments also seem to be sustainable as they are related to some long-term decisions, changes, and investments. Will this be in the long-term interest of these countries? This issue is a separate challenge, which is related to the question which interest is most relevant? Is it freedom or financial well-being? How successfully will China manage to import their own cultural structures into the above-mentioned African countries? Concerning educations, infrastructure, sustainable energy, healthcare, employment and related issues, the Chinese investments seem to be in the interest of the countries mentioned. A question which still needs to be analysed is the following: What will be the implications concerning the political and cultural structures which get imported at the same time?



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