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Article — Published Version

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Journal of International Development

Provided in Cooperation with:

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Suggested Citation: Rudyak, Marina (2022) : 'We help them, and they help us': Reciprocity and relationality in Chinese aid to Africa, Journal of International Development, ISSN 1099-1328, Wiley, Hoboken, NJ, Vol. 35, Iss. 4, pp. 583-599, <https://doi.org/10.1002/jid.3699>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/288042>

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‘We help them, and they help us’: Reciprocity and relationality in Chinese aid to Africa

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Abstract

This paper applies Marcel Mauss' *Gift Theory* in conjunction with Qin Yaqing's *Relational Theory* to Chinese foreign aid. It proposed that this approach allows to conceptualise Chinese aid to Africa as a continuous gift cycle initiated in Bandung and has been going uninterrupted till today. The paper argues through the language of reciprocity and relationality, China *symbolically* affords the recipient *status* in a way that Northern aid does not. The *real* existing power asymmetries between China and Africa do not per se translate into unlimited influence as China can never be sure of reciprocity and is obliged to keep giving continuously.

KEYWORDS

Africa, aid, China, development, development cooperation, Gift Theory, international relations, Relational Theory

1 | INTRODUCTION

When the Chinese leader talks about Chinese aid to Africa, both domestically and addressing African counterparts, they often invoke an image of a shared past of joint ‘anti-imperial and anticolonial struggle’ when China always aided Africa to the best of its ability despite its own poverty. They portray China's cooperation with Africa as based on ‘friendship’ and ‘mutual benefit’ and express gratitude for mutual African support in the United Nations (UN). The rhetoric is pervasive. The *China and Africa White Paper* of 2021 mentions ‘friendship’ 34 times and the term ‘mutual’ 28 times (State Council Information Office [SCIO], 2021a). Before Xi Jinping detailed in his address to the 2021 Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) how China will support Africa (the word ‘support’ occurred 11 times in his speech), he spoke about the long shared history, friendship and mutual benefit:

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Over the past 65 years, China and Africa have forged unbreakable fraternity in our struggle against imperialism and colonialism ... The key lies in an everlasting spirit of China-Africa friendship and cooperation forged between the two sides, which features sincere friendship and equality, win-win for mutual benefit and common development ... This year marks the 50th anniversary of the restoration of China's lawful seat in the United Nations ... China will never forget the profound friendship of African countries. (Xi, 2021)

Euro-American debates often dismiss such references as propaganda. Critical scholars highlight the gap between the rhetoric of equality and power asymmetries in the relationship (Benabdallah, 2020; Carrozza & Benabdallah, 2022) and explain specific (e.g., collaterals) and diffuse (i.e., political support in the UN) reciprocity with China's ability to coerce or corrupt recipients (Eisenman, 2022). The rhetoric is undoubtedly employed strategically (Link, 2013; Schoenhals, 1992), and the link between aid and corruption has been documented in the literature beyond China (Pavlik & Young, 2022). Still, it merits engagement: The rhetoric of 'mutual benefit' or 'win-win'—to which I refer here as *reciprocity*, and of 'friendship'—to which I refer here as *relationality*, has been fairly constant from the mid-1950s till today (Strauss, 2019) and largely congruent with the language, which China's recipients in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) have employed for South–South Cooperation since Bandung. As criticised by Franceschini and Loubere (2022) in their proposed framework *Global China as Method*, 'current analyses ... tend to put too much emphasis on what is observable at this moment, neglecting the history and background of what we are witnessing today' (p. 41). Chinese aid to Africa has been shaped by (and is now shaping) globalisation (Johnston & Rudyak, 2017). The contemporary China–Africa aid relations are an *assemblage* with a historical identity (DeLand, 2016, p. 19) and a historical memory (Assmann, 2011), of which the rhetoric has been and continues to be a constitutive part. Therefore, the first baseline of this paper is that *words matter* and should be taken seriously as 'perlocutionary acts' (Austin, 1975). In Chinese politics, formalised language is a source of power and something Chinese officials use not only to assert things but to *do* things, 'to produce consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, and actions of people' (Schoenhals, 1992, p. 5). Second, the paper follows the *Global China* framework proposed by Franceschini and Loubere (2022, p. 6), who argue that 'understanding Chinese–global entanglements requires a fundamentally relational perspective'. This also applies to our understanding of today's aid relations that go beyond reducing African responses to China's ability to coerce.

This paper asks what insights we can gain from the rhetoric of reciprocity and relationality in Chinese aid discourse with respect to Chinese aid giving and African reciprocity if we consider Chinese aid to Africa as a *process* that has been going on uninterrupted since the mid-1950s. Specifically, this paper draws on Marcel Mauss' (2002) *Gift Theory* and Qin Yaqing's (2018) *Relational Theory*, who, respectively, theorise gift-giving and reciprocity as a *gift* cycle (Mauss) or *renqing* cycle (Qin). Separately, development scholars have engaged with Mauss' reflections on the universality of gift-giving to theorise foreign aid and international development cooperation, while China scholars have drawn on Qin's work for insights into how traditional Confucian concepts of relationality influence China's international relations. So far, there have been few attempts to connect the two.¹ For an analysis of Chinese foreign aid to Africa, it promises complementarity to combine a general argument about gift-giving (Mauss) with a corresponding theorisation from a Confucian perspective (Qin). However, such an analysis cannot be exhaustive at this stage, and therefore, the purpose of this paper is rather to test the field for further exploration.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 introduces how gift-giving is conceptualised in *Gift Theory* and *Relational Theory* and shows how both condition relational thinking in long-term categories. This forms the basis for analysing Chinese aid to Africa in Section 3 as one uninterrupted gift cycle. Following a brief outline of the origins of reciprocity in Chinese aid thinking, this section turns to the initiation of the cycle in Bandung, which culminated in the PRC'S admission to the UN, and subsequent debates about the obligation for China to continue giving in order to maintain its status. The section concludes with a reflection on what China gains, by referring

¹One being the papers at the panel on "China and the Gift" at ISA 2021, specifically by Benabdallah (2021) and Rudyak (2021).

to the existing evidence on reciprocity. Section 4 discusses the insights that can be drawn from Qin and Mauss to analyse the reciprocity of Chinese foreign aid. It concludes that the value of *Relational Theory* lies primarily in the contributions it can make to explaining Chinese actions, but it shows limitations when explaining the reciprocity of actors who do not belong to Confucian communities. Here, Mauss' general argument about the impossibility of 'free gifts' offers complementary insights, in particular for understanding the China–Africa aid relationship in a global context. The paper concludes with a commentary on the implications of this analysis for evolving China–Africa development partnerships.

1.1 | Conceptual note on 'aid' for the purpose of this paper

'Foreign aid' (对外援助) refers to China's official development assistance (ODA) (China International Development Cooperation Agency, China Ministry of Foreign Affairs & China Ministry of Commerce, 2021; SCIO, 2021b), which is comprised of grants, zero-interest loans and concessional loans. The term has been used since China started giving aid in 1951. Next to 'foreign aid', China provides other types of official finance (OOF), that is, export subsidies in the form of preferential and non-preferential export buyer's credits through the Exim Bank, project loans through the China Development Bank (CDB) and equity through special funds such as the China–Africa Development Fund and China–Africa Industrial Capacity Cooperation Fund (Rudyak & Chen, 2021). In the course of aid reforms initiated under Xin Jinping, China adopted the DAC term 'international development cooperation', with 'foreign aid' now defined as one of its pillars and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as the other (SCIO, 2021b). In external communication, however, China has referred to both foreign aid and commercial activities as aid or support. Thus, to recipients, all Chinese flows may appear as 'aid'² or simply as 'China'.³ For the purpose of this paper, aid refers to what China communicates as such.

2 | RECIPROCITY AND RELATIONALITY IN GIFT THEORY AND RELATIONAL THEORY

According to the French anthropologist Marcel Mauss (2002) practices of gift exchange are universal and constitutive of social life. Mauss, who studied the practices of *Kula* and *Potlatch* in traditional societies, conceptualises the gift as a complex process that creates a social bond between the giver and the recipient through a 'total' system of obligations to give, to receive and to reciprocate. The obligation to reciprocate stems, for Mauss, from the psychological consequences caused by an unreciprocated gift (or charity):

The unreciprocated gift ... makes the person who has accepted it inferior, particularly when it has been accepted with no thought of returning it. ... Charity is still wounding for him who has accepted it. (p. 83)

An unreciprocated gift becomes 'poison'—Mauss refers to the double meaning of the word 'Gift' as gift and poison in ancient Germanic languages (p. 81). Reciprocity bestowed the recipient with honour, affording them a symbolic status as equal.

Development scholars have drawn on Mauss' claims about the universality of gift-giving to theorise foreign aid and international development cooperation (e.g., Furia, 2015; Hattori, 2001; Heins et al., 2018; Kapoor, 2008; Mawdsley, 2012). In particular, Mauss elaborations on the 'poisonous' nature of 'free gifts' have inspired a macro-

²The ODA databases in Cambodia and the Philippines, for example, include both—Chinese ODA concessional loans and non-ODA preferential export buyer's credits. The difference is recognisable by the currency: Chinese ODA is provided in RMB, Chinese other official finance (OOF) in USD.

³Statement by a think tank researcher from a South-East Asian country at a BRI roundtable in July 2020.

critique of the North–South aid dynamics (Furia, 2015; Hattori, 2001; Kapoor, 2008). Mawdsley (2012) applied *Gift Theory* to the ‘aid’ elements of South–South Cooperation. She concludes that the assertion of a shared experience and the insistence on equality, respect for national sovereignty and ‘mutual benefit’ have a positive valence attached to them that some Western observers fail to comprehend (Mawdsley, 2012, pp. 262–263). Though she observes in a later paper that many Southern donors have begun to reduce the emphasis on Southern solidarity (Mawdsley, 2018, p. 177), this cannot be said for China, whose rhetoric continues to emphasise ‘friendship’ and ‘mutual benefit’.

Sinophone international studies scholars have long highlighted the *relationality* of Chinese foreign policy (Qin, 2018; Shih et al., 2019; Yan, 2013; Zhao, 2021). Drawing on Chinese intellectual traditions, especially Confucianism, Qin Yaqing has proposed a distinctly Chinese *Relational Theory of World Politics* (Qin, 2018) to respond to what he perceives as shortcomings of ‘mainstream IR’ in explaining Chinese foreign policy. According to Qin (2018, p. 138), Chinese IR thinking is rooted in the Confucian view that the world is primarily a social world of human relations. For him, this gives rise to three assumptions: (i) the ‘principle of coexistence’, which sees the coexistence or relational existence of social actors as the basic form of life in the social world; (ii) the argument of ‘relational identity formation’, which holds that identities of an actor are formed and reformed through relations with others; and (iii) the assumption of ‘shared interest’, which maintains that interests are always shared once actors are socially related. Hence, Qin conceptualises power as ‘relational power’, because it stems from the ability to ‘manage relations’ (p. 228). Thus, the ultimate motive of *guanxi* (relationships) is ‘relations for relations’ sake’ (p. 225). Confucian or Confucian-influenced communities establish relationships through doing and returning *renqing*, translated as ‘human feeling’ or ‘human sentiments’:

renqing is a social practice, characterised by reciprocal human feelings and obligations through the norm of ‘*bao*’ (roughly meaning ‘reciprocity’). In fact it is more like the *habitus* in Bourdieu’s terminology and embedded deeply in the background knowledge of Chinese communities. ‘Do a *renqing*’ and ‘return a *renqing*’ is what members of a Chinese community do without even thinking about it. (p. 281)

The first *renqing* deal turns strangers into friends in the sense that they are related and the recipient owes the giver a *renqing zhai*, a debt of gratitude (p. 283). The reciprocity establishes an ideally continuous cycle in which each side’s power resources are become sharable and ‘sharable’ and ‘exchangeable’ (p. 242).

Although Qin was accused of essentialism (e.g., by Ho, 2019), his position as one of China’s most influential foreign policy thinkers means that his views to a certain degree incorporate ideational features of Chinese political thought and his insights are reflective of Chinese leadership’s political preferences (Ho, 2019). For this reason, China scholars have drawn on Qin to examine how traditional Confucian concepts of relationality influence China’s international relations in general (e.g., Kavalski, 2018; Nordin, 2020; Nordin & Smith, 2018; Shih et al., 2019) and the relations with Africa in particular (e.g., Benabdallah, 2020, 2021; Carrozza & Benabdallah, 2022; Eisenman, 2022).

For both Mauss and Qin, the *gift* or *renqing* is a resource for exchange that can be material or non-material and can be done with or without instrumental purposes. Both play on eliciting emotions—*renqing* is literally translated as ‘human feeling’ or ‘human sentiments’ (Qin, 2018, p. 280), while Mauss’s (2002, p. 25) purpose of the *gift* is ‘to foster friendly feelings’. For both, shared interests (Qin) or solidarity (Mauss) are not prerequisite for cooperation, but something that is built through cycles of gift exchange. However, the *gift* or *renqing* cycle depends on the fulfilment of all its components. Qin (2018, p. 228) highlights that the *renqing* cycle only works if actors expect the relationship to continue. If it is terminated, both parties lose the power resources. Mauss, on the other hand, sees giving not (just) as a power resource but as an obligation—the obligation to give is not less important than the obligation to receive:

To refuse to give, to fail to invite, just as to refuse to accept, is tantamount to declaring war; it is to reject the bond of alliance and commonality. (Mauss, 2002, p. 17).

And so, both condition relational thinking in long-term categories (Heins et al., 2018, p. 138; Shih et al., 2019, p. 25). For Qin (2018, p. 348), the logic of 'relational rationality' is process-oriented rather than outcome-oriented, which he contrasts with the 'rational rationality' of mainstream IR. Accordingly, China derives long-term security not only from military or economic power or commonly agreed norms—as both have been historically always subject to change—but from stable relationships (Shih et al., 2019). As long as the relationship exists, mutual interests can always be found. Similarly, Mauss argues that it is the creation of mutual interests that, in the long run, prevents wars:

Societies have progressed in so far as they themselves, their subgroups, and lastly, the individuals in them, have succeeded in stabilising relationships, giving, receiving, and finally, giving in return. Only then did people learn how to create mutual interests, giving mutual satisfaction, and, in the end, to defend them without having to resort to arms. (Mauss, 2002, p. 106)

This cross-mapping does not claim to be exhaustive, and a comprehensive comparison of Qin and Mauss would merit separate research. However, as an initial exploration, it does provide a sufficient basis for examining Chinese aid to Africa as a *gift/renqing* cycle.

3 | CHINESE AID TO AFRICA AS CYCLE OF GIFT-GIVING/RENQING

In the Chinese discourse, the idea that foreign aid is a *gift* that should be generally reciprocated can be traced back as early as Republican China (Rudyak, 2021). In 1919, the first president of the Republic of China (RoC), Sun Yat-sen, proposed to the League of Nations to provide China with capital and technical expertise for its economic and industrial revolution and offered access to China's resources in return (Sun, 1920, p. V; Helleiner, 2014, p. 377). When in 1945, Communist leader Mao Zedong asked the United States for economic assistance, he highlighted the mutual benefit of this proposal and offered the US resources and agricultural products in exchange (FRUS, 1945). Though China, as a post-colonial and war-torn country, was in an inferior position, the insistence on reciprocity, read through the lens of Mauss, would allow China to appear at least symbolically as an equal. When the United States declined the Communists' aid requests (as they were ideologically aligned with the Soviet Union), Zhou Enlai, the PRC's first Premier and top diplomat, proclaimed that China would only 'welcome help from friends and on the basis of equality and mutual assistance' (Zhou, 1949). The aid it subsequently received from the Soviet Union was 'mutually beneficial' in the sense that Soviet concessional loans were tied to purchasing commodities and military materials (Watanabe, 2013). When in 1950, China started giving aid to other countries—first to North Korea and North Vietnam, and after the Bandung Conference to newly decolonised countries in Asia and Africa, the earlier insistence on reciprocity as a *recipient* translated into the Chinese rhetoric on *giving*—and has been present till today (Rudyak, 2021).

3.1 | Initiating the gift cycle

The first White Paper on 'China's Foreign Aid' (SCIO, 2011) says that through foreign aid, China has consolidated friendly relations and economic and trade cooperation with other developing countries.

If we consider Chinese aid to Africa as a cycle of *gift-giving/renqing*, then the starting point for this is the Bandung Conference of 1955. Qin (2018, pp. 282–283) elaborates that *renqing* turns 'strangers' into 'friends': '[o]nce a *renqing* is done', the doer and the recipient 'are no longer strangers, and they are related by this first *renqing* deal'. For Mauss, the first gift similarly serves to create a relationship; moreover, he views giving as an obligation when seeking peace, alliance or commonality (Mauss, 2002, p. 17).

Before the Bandung conference, the PRC had only a few 'friends': It was subject to an economic embargo following its involvement in the Korean War, barely recognised diplomatically outside the Communist bloc and

excluded from the UN where the exiled RoC government on Taiwan represented *China*. In this context, foreign aid became a means to establish relations and break through international isolation. Bandung presented a chance to turn ‘strangers’ into ‘friends’ as of the 30 countries attending, 23 had no diplomatic relations with China (Chinese Foreign Ministry Archives, 2007, pp. 41–42). Zhou Enlai, who led China's Bandung delegation, employed *renqing* in the original sense of the word, ‘human sentiment’ or ‘human feelings’: He appealed to the feelings of commonality by stressing that China came to ‘seek common ground while reserving [ideological] differences’:

[W]e do have different ideologies and different social systems. But ... is there any reason why we cannot understand and respect each other and give support and sympathy to each other? ... We ... are all backward economically and culturally. ... Why should we not engage in friendly cooperation? (Zhou, 1955a)

Rhetorically, Zhou painted the picture of a shared disadvantage caused by the colonial past, which dictated cooperation on the basis of equality and mutual benefit:

We Asian and African countries need to cooperate in the economic and cultural fields in order to facilitate the elimination of the economic and cultural backwardness caused by the long period of colonial exploitation and oppression. This cooperation should be based on equality and mutual benefit, with no conditions for privilege attached. (Zhou, 1955b)

Zhou's approach in Bandung reflects all three levels of Qin (2018, p. 300) *relational power* argument: the principle of coexistence (cooperation beyond ideologies), relational identity formation (colonial oppression and backwardness as the unifying factor) and the assumption that once a relationship is established, shared interests can always be found. He engaged in numerous side-talks, during which either African representatives committed to send a trade delegation or invited China to send a trade delegation (Chinese Foreign Ministry Archives [CFMA], 2007, pp. 90–93). This prepared the ground for initiating the cycle of *gift-giving/renqing* that would lead to diplomatic recognition: In almost all cases of diplomatic recognition within the next 5 years after Bandung, there is a temporal correlation with the first aid project to a country (Table 1). The following years saw Zhou Enlai travelling to Africa at the turn of the years 1963/1964 and a rapid expansion of aid. In 1964, Chinese loan to Africa amounted to 53% of all loans given in

TABLE 1 Year of diplomatic recognition and first foreign aid project

Country	Year of diplomatic recognition	Year of first aid project
Algeria	1958	1958
Cambodia	1956	1956
Ceylon (now Sri Lanka)	1957	1957
Egypt	1956	1956
Ghana	1960	1961
Guinea	1959	1959/1960
Laos	1961	1962
Mali	1960	1961
Nepal	1955	1956
North Yemen	1956	1958
Somalia	1960	1963
Syria	1956	1963

Source: Own figure with year of first project data from Lin (1993) and year of diplomatic recognition from Wikipedia (2022).

that year (Yu, 1988). The Cultural Revolution did not hinder China to commit to the construction of the 2000-km-long Tanzania-Zambia Railway (TAZARA) amidst the Cultural Revolution. The *gifts* were reciprocated: in 1971, the UNGA voted to admit the PRC to the UN and to exclude the RoC on Taiwan in turn. As Figure 1 shows, countries supporting the PRC in the UN were also subsequently rewarded (Fuchs & Rudyak, 2019).

3.2 | Obligation to continue giving once the relationship is established

Once the *renqing* cycle is initiated, the recipient is obliged to *bao*, to reciprocate the favour. However, according to Qin (2018, pp. 282–283), this only happens if both sides expects the relationship to continue in the future. The *gifts* that brought China international status had been expensive. In 1973, China was aiding 66 countries with aid accounting for 2.05% of GDP (Zhang, 2012), while ranking among the world's 20 least developed countries (Brautigam, 2009, p. 54). After 1978, the new leadership around Deng Xiaoping began to re-evaluate aid of the Mao era and questioned whether China should continue to give aid at all if the resources were needed for its own reforms and modernisation (Shi, 1989, pp. 68–70). Opponents of continuing aid within the leadership that the deteriorating relations with two of China's largest aid recipients, Vietnam and Albania, showed that aid did not per se guarantee 'friendship' (Shi, 1989, pp. 68–69), that is, influence. However, one factor in the worsening of the relations was that China reduced its grain aid to both in 1975 (Shi, 1989). For Qin (2018, p. 262), if the giving party interrupts the *renqing-bao* cycle, it loses its relational power. For Mauss (2002, p. 17), refusing to give is to reject the bond of alliance and can amount to a declaration of war. Though aid was one of many factors, the worsening relationship resulted in the Sino-Vietnamese war of 1979.

Deng Xiaoping acknowledged that aid spending had been too high in the past. Still, in principle, aid was a necessary strategic expenditure that had to be continued:

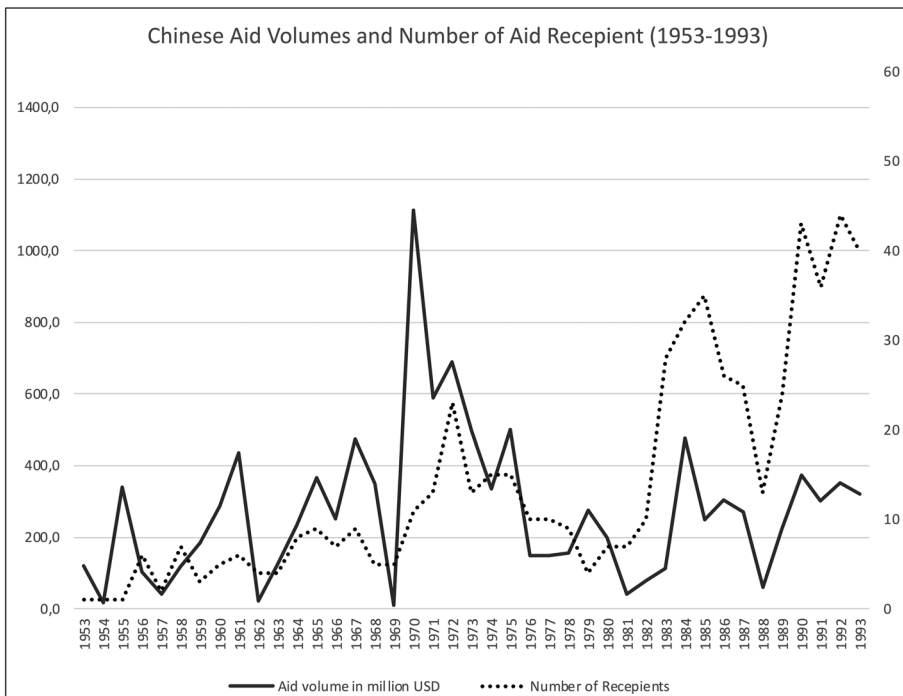


FIGURE 1 Chinese Aid Volumes and Number of Aid Recipients (1953–1993). Source: Own figure with data from Kobayashi (2008) for aid volumes and Lin (1996) for the number of aid recipients

It should be affirmed that we were right to aid the Third World in the past. Our country is facing economic hardships, but we still need to spend the necessary amount on foreign aid. Strategically, we have to spend a considerable amount on aid even when we are developed, and China should not forget this then. (Shi, 1989, p. 70)

However, the cases of Vietnam and Albania showed the need to avoid the impression that China was giving less. Therefore, how to continue given the limited resources became a central question for China's leadership, as exemplified by Party Secretary General Hu Yaobang in this 1980 speech on 'How to support the Third World correctly?':

We really have to be careful not to give the impression internationally that we have sent money everywhere in the last few years to make friends, and now it is all about the costs. Otherwise, even old friends can be lost. (Hu, 1982)

In the search for ways 'to do more while spending less', Hu (1982) suggested to copy India, that used aid to promote exports and built joint ventures. Thus, economic benefit for China could reduce the costs of aid, while still help gain influence. Indeed, the 'Four Principles of Economic and Technical Cooperation' announced during Premier Zhao Ziyang's visit to Africa in 1983, mutual benefit, practical results, diversity of forms and common development (RMRB, 1983), are largely congruent with discussions on India–Africa relations in Chinese publications at that time (Rudyak, 2020, pp. 107–13).

However, as evidence from publications authored by cadres from the aid administration, the envisioned shift to mutual economic benefit did not work out and China continued to cater to unprofitable requests (Fan, 1992; Qi, 1992; Wang, 1994). In fact, not long after his Africa visit, Zhao (1983) strongly emphasised the political importance of aid:

The impression African friends have of Chinese people is very good. Whatever happens, we must not spoil this. [...] We may not be able to give much foreign aid in the future, but it is directly related to our country's reputation and our country's image.

As shown in Figure 1, in absolute terms, Chinese aid figures did not decline as significantly as could be from the mutual economic benefit rhetoric (Figure 1). In 1984, it was the eighth-largest bilateral donor in sub-Saharan Africa, giving about as much as Norway (OECD, 1987, p. 8).

The shift to mutual economic benefit happened only in the 1990s. When after the Tiananmen crackdown in 1989 the West sanctioned China, Chinese aid commitments quadrupled compared to 1988, while the number of recipients subsequently doubled (Figure 1) in the quest to reach as many countries as possible. In this way, China mobilised support to successfully thwart the Western efforts to pass a country-specific resolution in the UN Commission on Human Rights (Rolland, 2020, p. 38). Western commentaries denoted the post-Tiananmen increase in aid as a 'cheap' way for China to buy political support (e.g., Taylor, 1998, p. 50). Chinese officials, on the other hand, worried about whether what China could spend on foreign aid would be enough to compete for influence with the West and not to lose relational power:

China needs to allocate a portion of its financial resources to foreign aid every year in order to strengthen [...] friendly relations with Third World Countries. This amount is insignificant for developed countries but a substantial expense for China. (Fan, 1992, p. 30)

In parallel, China saw the end of the Cold War as an opportunity to step in when the West withdrew. DAC aid to Africa alone declined by 19.6% between 1981 and 1989 (Cai, 1992). Moreover, Chinese aid officials believed that now developing countries were 'expecting more assistance from China' (IEC, 1993). Together with economic shifts

(Johnston & Rudyak, 2017), triggered a foreign aid reform, which following the Japanese example introduced concessional loans as a new aid form and made Chinese companies the main aid implementing actors. In concessional loans, the state subsidises a commercial loan out of the aid budget—while the whole loan and thus an otherwise commercial project can be declared as ‘foreign aid’ (Qi, 1992, p. 5). This way, China could provide more *renqing*/gifts and substantially increase the visibility of its aid, while keeping the costs manageable and helping Chinese companies to ‘go global’. To date, concessional loans make up half of foreign aid (SCIO, 2021b).

3.3 | Using a shared past to build a shared future

Reciprocity can be *specific* or *diffuse* (Keohane, 1986). The *Gift Theory* is concerned with the latter. There is no (legal or contractual) guarantee of reciprocation. Rather, to reciprocate is a social obligation, that is undertaken asynchronously and in-kind, meaning it is not measured in monetary terms (Heins et al., 2018, p. 127). This allows framing the gift exchanges as an expression of a social bond rather than a trade or payback (Heins et al., 2018). The *renqing* in *Relational Theory* functions similarly: ‘Your friend has offered you some help when you need it, then you may return it with a gift, which may not be as valuable in monetary terms, but reflects your thanks in a sincere way’. (Qin, 2018, p. 282). In *Gift Theory*, Heins et al. (2018, p. 138) point out, ‘group solidarity is not a prerequisite of successful cooperation, but a resource that needs to be built up through cycles of gift exchange’. Similarly, the cycle of doing and returning *renqing* enhances the relationship over time (Qin, 2018, p. 282).

As Brautigam (2009, p. 54) highlights, the Western debates about the sudden appearance of China in Africa from 2005 ignored that ‘China never left’. In light of the declining DAC aid to Africa paired with an increase in conditionality, it could present itself as the solidary friend who responded to African needs when the West did not—even though during the Hu/Wen era, aid became a central tool to facilitate trade and investment while Africa started to accumulate trade deficit and debt.

Though empirical data on the reciprocity of Chinese aid in terms of influences is still scarce, a growing body of research looks at the evidence of reciprocity in the UN. For Chinese aid to Africa between 2000 and 2013, there is evidence of correlation between receipts of highly concessional flows and recipients’ voting in line with China in UNGA on human rights (Dreher et al., 2018). This correlation was higher than for less concessional flows (Dreher et al., 2018); however, there is also evidence for reciprocity of trade (Flores-Macías & Kreps, 2013 for 1996–2006) and FDI (Stone et al., 2022 for 2000–2013). Since China has framed both foreign aid and commercial flows as ‘aid’, and it can be difficult for outsiders to distinguish which is which, this reciprocity is not surprising. Furthermore, there is evidence that between 1999 and 2009, states moved disproportionately into alignment with China on resolutions regarding the norms of sovereignty, international order, human rights, non-interference and democracy that were repeated over multiple UNGA meetings (Brazys & Dukalskis, 2017). The Chinese government has frequently linked these areas to its core interests (Nathan & Scobell, 2012). However, alignment in the UNGA happens not only through voting in line with China’s position but also through abstaining from voting or not attending respective UNGA plenary meetings (Strüver, 2016). All of this suggests that, when faced with sanctions in the UN after 1989 and with later scrutiny on human rights issues in Tibet, Hong Kong and Xinjiang, territorial claims in the South China Sea or the Taiwan question, China could capitalise on the social bonds built in the long gift-giving cycle since 1955.

Since Xi Jinping came to power and the launch of the BRI in 2013, China has stepped up its efforts to expand its networks with the developing world, particularly Africa. Under Xi, the Sino-African partnership was upgraded from a ‘strategic partnership’ to a ‘comprehensive strategic partnership’ in 2015 and to the commitment to build a ‘community of shared destiny’ in 2018 (Liu, 2021). These changes are more than words: they signify that it is vital for China to project that the Sino-African relationship is becoming ever closer. Since China has declared the intent to ‘move close to centre stage’ (Xi, 2017) and ‘take an active part in leading the reform of the global governance system’ (Xinhua, 2018), it will rely even more on African support in the UN in particular in light with the evolving conflict with the United States. China has stepped up the material *renqing*, by offering loans within the BRI as the solution to close

the infrastructure gap and to connect developing countries with large markets (i.e., its own) and through continuing to give aid—acutely, through Covid-19 vaccines and medical equipment, and in the form of new programmes to help mitigate climate change. China is also stepping up the efforts to deploy *renqing* in the original sense of the word ‘human sentiment’ or ‘human feelings’ on issues of global governance. In the pursuit of its UN agenda, it has been playing to the sentiment of commonality and the ‘social bond’ in the same way it has done throughout history while presenting it as a shared interest. In his 2021 FOCAC address, Xi (2021) argued:

The world needs genuine multilateralism. Peace, development, fairness, justice, democracy and freedom are the common values of all mankind, and they are the common goals that both China and Africa are striving for. [...] We both oppose interference in internal affairs, racial discrimination and unilateral sanctions. We must stand up for the just claims of developing countries and translate our common aspirations and common interests into common actions.

Such statements can be read as coercion and a warning that aid would be withdrawn if African countries do not support China in the UN (Eisenman, 2022). Indeed, Lam and Fung (2021) find an increase in the frequency of PRC-specific terms or terms whose meaning has been reinterpreted by the PRC in UN documents and UN department annual reports, which is part of China's effort to build ‘international discourse power’ (Rolland, 2020). They suggest that voting affinity with China helps countries secure more UN leadership positions, which in turn leads to a greater occurrence of PRC-specific and PRC-reinterpreted terms in UN documents, and thus to their greater similarity to PRC documents.

However, the intensified rhetoric could also mean that China is concerned about whether it will continue to receive the needed support. Many Chinese projects face popular backlash in Africa (Lang & Rudyak, 2022), and governments, including the Democratic Republic of Congo and Ghana, complain that ‘mining for infrastructure’ projects have not delivered on the promised goals (Byamungu & Geraud, 2021). In light of both *Gift Theory* and *Relational Theory*, it is also a plausible explanation for why China continues to lend to ‘friends’ who face massive credit risks (Ferchen & Perera, 2019) and has begun to offer ‘rescue loans’ to BRI countries to stave off debt defaults (Financial Times, 2022).

4 | INSIGHTS INTO RECIPROCITY

The historical dimensions discussed so far provide a window into the relational thinking of the Chinese government, which clearly sees development cooperation as an investment in the future. The application of *Gift Theory* and *Relational Theory* where they overlap allows to conceptualise Chinese aid to Africa as a continuous *gift/renqing* cycle and to shed light on China's perceived obligation to give. To this end, the section has only addressed the motive of relational security (Huang & Shih, 2014; Shih et al., 2019) and the search for status. It has not the motive of ‘internationalism and humanitarianism’ that is highlighted in Chinese official communication (Luo, 2021) and academic literature (Zhou, 2017), which would merit a separate exploration, particularly in light of Mauss solidarist rationalism (Heins et al., 2018, p. 136). Having applied *Gift Theory* and *Relational Theory* in conjunction, this section turns to the question what insights that can be drawn from Qin and Mauss about reciprocity.

4.1 | Limitations of *Relational Theory* in explaining African reciprocity

Qin has proposed *Relational Theory* as a distinctly Chinese theory of international relations. Its value for analysing Chinese foreign aid lies primarily in the contributions it can make to explaining Chinese actions, particularly the strategic deployment of *renqing*. This was demonstrated, for example, by Eisenman (2022), who applied Qin to China's

advancement of the 'Community of shared future for mankind' in Africa. Eisenman (2022, p. 8) concludes that the Confucian conception of reciprocity conditions China's Africa policy to be deeply Sinocentric and thus hierarchical in the traditional sense of *Tianxia* (Qin, 2011; Zhao, 2021)—the perfect harmony of all under heaven between China and all those who accept it as the centre. In this set-up, the 'win-win' rhetoric is nothing more than just a tactic to build a multilevel network of social relations with key African stakeholders to elicit their support and deference through the threat of dissolvability of relational power (Eisenman, 2022, p. 11). Here, applying Qin's *Relational Theory* produces a plausible *rational* explanation for reciprocity (Keohane, 2005, pp. 99–105): African countries reciprocate because they fear the material costs they will incur if they do not. However, as Strüver (2016, p. 173) argues, it is worth considering 'the Chinese government's ability to *coerce* other states into accommodating its interests *as just one of several explanatory factors* [sic.!] as to why China succeeds in gaining support from other countries for its foreign policy priorities.

Even if one accepts that the rhetoric of 'friendship' and 'win-win' cooperation is just a manipulation tactic to conceal the belief in own cultural superiority, and 'host diplomacy' is nothing but rituals of centre-periphery encounters—it would still be how China believes the global order '*should* be organised', and not how it *is* organised (Breslin, 2020, p. 141). It does not follow that African states reciprocate because they accept China as the centre and subordinate themselves to the Sinocentric world. Moreover, one could even ask to what extent *Relational Theory* can be at all applied to explain the behaviour of (African) actors' that are not part of the Confucian context, given that Qin defines *renqing* as 'the main mechanism to maintain the exchangeability of power relations' in 'Chinese [sic.!] communities' (Qin, 2018, p. 280). Though Qin assumes that human action is universally based on relationships (p. xii), he also argues that theories have a local origin (i.e., in a specific cultural context) and, therefore, cannot be universally valid (p. 58). This, by the way, distinguishes him from Mauss, who claims the *Gift Theory* to be universal.

Having said that, while the China–Africa relationship is asymmetric, *Relational Theory* may still offer explanatory value beyond Sinocentrism and coercion, because, as Kavalski (2018) reminds us, asymmetry does not per se generate influence, not even in a Confucian context:

It is important to note that in a Confucian context even though *guanxi* relations are asymmetrical, they are nevertheless volitional—in other words, the structure of hierarchy should not be misunderstood as giving one side influence over the other. (Kavalski, 2018, p. 72)

However, if one assumes its universal validity, then *relational power* is sharable and borrowable for all. While China is the biggest bilateral lender in Africa, it holds only 12% of African external debt, compared to 13% by other governments, 39% by multilateral institutions and 35% by Western private lenders (Debt Justice, 2022). Moreover, there is evidence that increased flows of Chinese official assistance lead to increased flows of ODA from DAC donors to the same countries due to competition with China (Mandon & Tesfaye Woldemichael, 2022). In particular, G7 countries and World Bank have been found to channel more financing into infrastructure projects in countries where China is more active coupled with a decrease in conditionality (Mandon & Tesfaye Woldemichael, 2022, p. 7). Brazys et al. (2017, pp. 2–3) assume that

if the recipient holds no sincere policy preference for a given issue on the international negotiation agenda, the optimal behavior for recipients is often to engage in [...] alignment with the position of their principal donor. This signalling of loyalty towards a donor is rational even in the absence of any donor requests to align.

Suppose one accepts other possible explanations outside of realist threats and shared authoritarianism. Why then do African recipients, as far as the limited empirical evidence shows, more inclined to see China as 'their principal donor' and to *bao* (reciprocate) Chinese aid rather than assistance (or loans and investment) from the West if Chinese share of *gifts/renqing* makes up only 12%?

4.2 | Insights from Gift Theory

It is particularly Mauss' elaborations on the 'free gift' that offer explanatory value beyond Qin in the specific context of foreign aid. Mauss defines the *gift* less by what it can be but rather by its function, namely being a 'part of a system of reciprocity in which the honour of giver and recipient are engaged' (Mauss, 2002, p. xi). If viewed through the lens of *Gift Theory*, the notions of reciprocity and 'mutual benefit' symbolically afford the recipient the status as *equal*. To return *renqing* makes one a 'friend', and 'practice of diplomacy between friends is much easier to undertake' (Qin, 2020, p. 168–169). But if *Relational Theory* is Sinocentric, then despite 'friendship', returning *renqing* does not necessarily make one symbolically equal from the perspective of China; however, from the perspective of the recipient, returning a *gift* does.

Therefore, it matters that the Chinese rhetoric has been congruent with the rhetoric of the NAM/South–South Cooperation, of which China still considers itself part. It also matters that both portray 'mutual benefit' as a counter-model to the DAC/Northern development cooperation (Grimm, 2014) and its symbolism of charity given from the generous rich to the needy poor. As outlined in the beginning of this paper, for Mauss, an unreciprocated gift is 'poison'. The gift of charity that cannot be reciprocated would be poisonous by design. Dillon (1968, p. 5) has traced the roots of French Anti-Americanism to the *gift* on the 'Marshall Plan' which due to its 'free' nature did not allow to restore self-esteem by returning the gift. Furia (2015, pp. 4–5) argues that because the reciprocity is not spelt out but expected, the 'unreciprocated, generous giving practices' of the North construct North–South relations as relations based on 'debt', namely, the 'debt of civilisation and culture'. Echoing Mauss, Furia points to the double meaning of the word 'debt' in German (*Schuld*), namely, 'debt' and 'fault'. In aid from North to South, the *debt* is the 'debt of civilisation and culture' as well as of *capacity* in relation to the donors' varied models, legal and political principles and moral imperatives, and thus, the failure to develop makes the recipient 'guilty' before the international/donor community (p. 5). Incidentally, a similar dynamic is at play in the disappointment that 'change through trade' (*Wandel durch Handel*) has not worked with regard to China, that is, that China has not become 'like us' despite all the interactions.

Mauss' social theory assumes that actors who are socially positioned in hierarchical relations of exchange are at the same time reflexive agents capable of understanding and influencing these relations (Oates & Grynawski, 2018, p. 145). Whether the Chinese side employs the rhetoric *vis-à-vis* its African counterparts solely for the purpose of establishing a Sinocentric web of relations or not, still, through the language of 'equality', 'friendship' and 'mutual benefit' and the rejection of conditionality, China establishes the recipient's ability to reciprocate—and thus *symbolically* affords the recipient *status* in a way that DAC/Northern aid does not. This is illustrated, for example, in the widely quote by the Prime Minister of Botswana, 'I find that the Chinese treat us as equals. The West treats us as former subjects' (Paulo & Reisen, 2010, p. 539).

So 'Does friendship really matter?' Cheng and Taylor (2017) pose this question in the title of their book on Chinese Aid to Africa (their answer is ambivalent). If 'friendship' is understood as a speech act and read against the rhetoric of DAC/Northern development cooperation, then the answer is: It does precisely because 'friendship' does not play a role in the North–South rhetoric. The DAC development cooperation speaks of 'partnerships' and of recipients as 'partner countries'. The German government's aid implementing agency GIZ (2018), for example, describes its mandate of capacity development as 'strengthening *partners* [sic.] and tapping potentials'. While this transition from *passive* 'recipients' to *actively participating* 'partners' is an important outcome of the recipient countries' (and donors') critique that culminated in the Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation (Abdel-Malek, 2015), the partnership is symbolically not one of equals. With no possibility for recipients/'partners' to reciprocate (outside of being good learners and adaptors), donors and recipients cannot become *friends*.

5 | CONCLUSION

What are the implications of this analysis for the evolving China–Africa development partnerships? First, though China is in a stronger position, it would be wrong to derive from the asymmetric nature of the relationship that it has an unlimited influence on Africa. The analysis of the *gift/renqing* cycle presented in this paper shows that China was continuously concerned about whether what it gives will be enough to secure ‘friendship’ and reciprocity. There are not enough indications to assume that this has changed. Securing ‘friendship’ and political alliances is worth economic losses and provides a possible explanation for why China continues to lend to ‘friends’ who face massive credit risks and has begun to offer ‘rescue loans’ to BRI countries to stave off debt defaults. It should be highlighted that this conclusion does not negate other motives. For African countries, this means that China is likely to continue funding risky projects; the shadow side, however, is higher a risk of defaults.

While Xi Jinping appeals to social bonds and rhetorically constructs a shared interest of sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs, the vision of development he offers Africa is essentially an externalisation of China's governance agenda. It understands development primarily in terms of technology-centred modernisation and social stability (Rudyak, 2021), without civil liberties and democratic participation that—this should not be forgotten—have always been part of intense internal debates in the Chinese Communist Party even if they are dormant now. As China steps up the respective efforts shaping global governance, it will continue to seek African support and invest in relational security and power. With the West stepping up with its own relational initiatives to counter the Belt and Road Initiative, such as the *Build Back Better World* of the G7 or the European Union's *Global Gateway*, it certainly broadens the bargaining spaces for Africa.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank Maria Repnikova, Lina Benabdallah and the participants of the ISA 2021 Panel on ‘China and the Gift’ as well as four anonymous peer-reviewers for comments on the earlier drafts of this paper and Maximilian Mayer for feedback on the general ideas for this paper. This paper builds on doctoral research that was supported by Heidelberg University and the Supp Foundation. Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data used in this study were taken from the respectively cited sources. No new data were generated.

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How to cite this article: Rudyak, M. (2023). 'We help them, and they help us': Reciprocity and relationality in Chinese aid to Africa. *Journal of International Development*, 35(4), 583–599. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jid.3699>