

Gagliardone, Iginio. 2019. *China, Africa, and the Future of the Internet*. London: Zed Books. xi + 193 pp. ISBN 978-1-78360-522-4

The author of this book starts with the statement that the role of the Internet in China is changing from being a potentially important factor of régime change to a tool of Chinese foreign influence in Africa. It is generally claimed that while the USA and the West in general purportedly stand for open global network, the People's Republic of China (similarly to the Russian Federation) wants the Internet to be partialised according to what is described as justified claims of state sovereign control. But this dichotomy seems to be simplistic, according to Iginio Gagliardone, and he tries to support this statement by analyzing Chinese recent strides into the development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in Africa. His general claim in the book under review is that after looking into many cases of Chinese involvement in shaping information societies in Africa we cannot automatically assume that it leads to spreading China's domestic Internet policies. Vice versa, Western involvement in building modern information networks on the African continent is not always associated with good governance and information openness. The book focuses on an empirical analysis of China's involvement in African information societies (being shaped by a collusion of domestic and global factors) and in the end finds little trace of Chinese unified strategy to export its authoritarian vision of ICT.

In the beginning, Gagliardone elaborates on the theme that, unlike some of its portrayals in media and some academic studies, China's actual participation in building African ICT capacities does not follow any preordained blueprint. Despite its size and financial strength, China cannot promote everything it wants and its impact is inevitably shaped by local conditions and challenges. According to him, it would be more appropriate to say that China is very successful in fitting into already present domestic visions of information society (as illustrated by the case of China's significant participation in the Nigerian space program). These visions vary significantly across Africa and that makes China's involvement ambivalent, because it leads to supporting very different social, political and economic values pursued by various African countries. Also, as Gagliardone reminds us, the spread of China's influence in Africa and elsewhere is fueled by more mundane interests than following a grand foreign policy strategy, such as seeking new and unproblematic

business opportunities, gaining experience in foreign environments, rising the credibility of Chinese business ventures and so on. Furthermore, thus far African states prove to be more skillful and resilient in using foreign involvement for expanding their domestic ICT sectors according to their own goals than is usually thought.

All of the above leads Gagliardone to analyse four case studies, including two democratic states (Ghana, Kenya) and two autocracies (Ethiopia and Rwanda), which have strong and complex ties to China. Ghana and Kenya have been at the forefront of African ICT innovations, with Kenya is probably the most important African state in terms of ICT policies, infrastructure and cross-border cooperation. Furthermore, much of the innovation has been fueled by competition between private entities and by civil society activism. China's involvement in both countries generally followed present visions on national goals of the information society. However, both African democracies show that new telecommunication technologies contribute to tensions in society and therefore cannot be automatically associated with providing positive public goods.

The analysis of both authoritarian states demonstrates that there is significant variability in terms of China's involvement in Africa. In Ethiopia, China helped to build a unique system of modern ICT infrastructure and services, completely owned and managed by the state, that went hand in hand with the political ideology of the ruling elite. Event though in Rwanda the goal of the Kagame regime was to use ICT progress as a tool for boosting legitimacy and capitalize on joining the digital revolution, plenty of room is left to the regime's technocratic elements to manage ICT projects. While Ethiopia sacrificed some progress in innovation in order to maintain state control, Rwanda has followed the more traditional way of combining state normative leadership with technological expertise and management of the private sector. All countries examined show that despite the West's propagation of their policies as supporting openness, good governance and modernity, on many occasions Western donors fail to support these goals in practice. As elaborated in chapter five, many instances of Internet control across the continent are not so much the result of Chinese involvement or inspiration by Chinese model of "sovereign national internet," but of antiterrorist policies backed by the USA and Western actors.

In chapter four Gagliardone discusses the topic that even though the PRC does not intentionally export its visions of the role of the state in controlling modern telecommunications, other actors are inspired by some of the multiple faces of China's contemporary ICT policies. Looking at various reactions of African states, institutions and individuals to China's ICT and Internet strategies, he questions the common perception that China exports its vision of the use of modern telecommunication technologies to the outside world. One of the reasons is that various African actors fail to see a unified Chinese vision of ICT that could potentially be emulated. This is a result of the lack of Chinese efforts to communicate its visions (outside the sphere of experts) and of internationally conflicting interpretation of this vision. Outside the PRC, especially in the West, the dominant characteristic of its approach to ICT is that of state dominance and censorship, which is seen as authoritarian and potentially dangerous to future development. Indeed, a censored Internet is common in all PRC's policies in e-commerce, digital media, Internet communication and technologies such as face recognition, etc. However, the PRC has overall a positive public image in Africa and Africa is still the continent where China has the highest positive ranking in public opinion surveys of any continent, despite the rise of anti-Chinese sentiments in several African countries during the past decade (for example in Zambia, Ghana and South Africa).

The book's last chapter discusses how China's involvement in African information societies will influence (or is already influencing) the modern communications sector not only in Africa, but also on the global scale. Here, as well in previous parts of his book, Gagliardone underlines the key argument of the book that, when looking at China's involvement in the development of ICT in Africa, it is necessary to relativize the simplistic dichotomy of an open and responsible West and the authoritarian and narrow-minded China. Especially when assessing China's influence on the development of modern telecommunications in Africa we need to see that the PRC neither follows a discernible blueprint, nor intentionally aids authoritarian policies. More simply put, the PRC more or less goes with the goals and policies that are already present in a particular country before getting itself involved. On the other hand, Gagliardone points out that there are other interesting things to witness when looking at the Chinese influence in Africa that do not sit well with Chinese official narrative of being led by a win-win attitude and the almost altruistic South-South cooperation with no strings attached. China

sees itself as a harbinger of its own version of modernity, ignoring local religious and social identities, not unlike the West in the past. For example, Chinese projects focus on cooperation with state-based entities, which leads to the marginalization of many non-state actors in civil society.

One of the greatest strengths of *China, Africa and the Future of Internet* is that it is a balanced book, avoiding the pitfalls of many studies that are either too critical of China's interventions in Africa, or unnecessarily applaud the PRC's policies towards the countries on the continent without objectively assessing the more negative aspects of its involvement. Moreover, Gagliardone's book is methodologically sound, with a clearly spelled out research design. Furthermore, the author utilizes many kinds of information, from secondary sources and newspaper articles to interviews with African politicians, Chinese engineers and diplomats, domestic and foreign journalists, NGO personnel and policy experts of different backgrounds. Thus, the book under review represents an important piece of contemporary research on one of the crucial aspects of China's involvement in Africa and everyone interested in Chinese and African politics could benefit from reading it.

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