

**Title:** The Next Empire

**Author:** Howard French

**Category:** Africa General

**Date:** 5/24/2010

**Source:** The Atlantic Monthly Group

**Source Website:** [www.theatlantic.com](http://www.theatlantic.com)

**African Charter Article# 22:** All peoples shall have the right to their economic, social and cultural development within the common heritage of humanity .

**Summary & Comment:** "All across Africa, new tracks are being laid, highways built, ports deepened, commercial contracts signed-all on an unprecedented scale, and led by China, whose appetite for commodities seems insatiable. Do China 's grand designs promise the transformation at last, of a star-crossed continent? Or merely its exploitation?" H.French. The author concludes with a quote from a Congolese lawyer in Lubumbashi: "The problem is to determine what is Africa's place in the future of the global economy, and up to now, we have seen very little that is new. China is taking the place of the West..." J.Stamp

---

### The Next Empire

All across Africa, new tracks are being laid, highways built, ports deepened, commercial contracts signed-all on an unprecedented scale, and led by China, whose appetite for commodities seems insatiable. Do China 's grand designs promise the transformation at last, of a star-crossed continent? Or merely its exploitation? The author travels deep into the heart of Africa, searching for answers.

A porter helped me with my bags as I made my way, sweating, into the train station in Dar es Salaam. In addition to my normal complement of luggage, I had brought a carton full of provisions, including several gallons of water, for a trip of uncertain duration. With the carton perched on his head, the porter led me through the vast, densely packed concourse and into the waiting salon. There, a clock sat high on the wall, its hands frozen since who knows when. Around the perimeter of the room, above the upholstered benches, the faded yellow walls bore what looked like a generation's worth of oily stains, laid down in layers in the shape of heads and shoulders by people leaning back, like me, bludgeoned by the thick afternoon heat and waiting for the call to board.

I was about to embark on one of the world's great train rides, a journey from this muggy Indian Ocean port city, the commercial capital of Tanzania, to the edge of the Zambian Copper Belt, deep in the heart of southern Africa. The official who'd sold me my ticket had seemed puzzled when I asked when the train would arrive at its final destination, and he refused to guess; in recent years, the 1,156-mile trip has been known to take anywhere from its originally scheduled two days to an entire week. The railroad-known as the Tazara line-was built by China in the early 1970s, at a cost of nearly \$500 million, an extraordinary

expenditure in the thick of the Cultural Revolution, and a symbol of Beijing's determination to hold its own with Washington and Moscow in an era when Cold War competition over Africa raged fierce. At the time of its construction, it was the third-largest infrastructure project ever undertaken in Africa, after the Aswan Dam in Egypt and the Volta Dam in Ghana .

Today the Tazara is a talisman of faded hopes and failed economic schemes, an old and unreliable railway with too few working locomotives. Only briefly a thriving commercial artery, it has been diminished by its own decay and by the roads and air routes that have sprung up around it. Maintenance costs have saddled Tanzania and Zambia with debts reportedly as high as \$700 million in total, and the line now has only about 300 of the 2,000 wagons it needs to function normally, according to Zambian news reports.

Yet the railway traces a path through a region where hopes have risen again, rekindled by a new sort of development also driven by China -and on an unprecedented scale. All across the continent, Chinese companies are signing deals that dwarf the old railroad project. The most heavily reported involve oil production; since the turn of the millennium, Chinese companies have muscled in on lucrative oil markets in places like Angola , Nigeria , Algeria , and Sudan . But oil is neither the largest nor the fastest-growing part of the story. Chinese firms are striking giant mining deals in places like Zambia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo , and building what is being touted as the world's largest iron mine in Gabon . They are prospecting for land on which to build huge agribusinesses. And to get these minerals and crops to market, they are building major new ports and thousands of miles of highway.

In most of Africa 's capital cities and commercial centers, it's hard to miss China's new presence and influence. In Dar, one morning before my train trip, I made my way to the roof of my hotel for a bird's-eye view of the city below. A British construction foreman, there to oversee the hotel's expansion, pointed out the V-shaped port that the British navy had seized after a brief battle with the Germans early in the First World War. From there, the British-built portion of the city extended primly inland, along a handful of long avenues. For the most part, downtown Dar was built long ago, and its low-slung concrete buildings, long exposed to the moisture of the tropics, have taken on a musty shade of gray.

"Do you see all the tall buildings coming up over there?" the foreman asked, a hint of envy in his voice as his arm described an arc along the waterfront that shimmered in the distance. "That's the new Dar es Salaam , and most of it is Chinese-built." I counted nearly a dozen large cranes looming over construction sites along the beachfront Msasani Peninsula , a sprawl of resorts and restaurants catering mostly to Western tourists. Near them, sheltered coyly behind high walls, lie upscale brothels worked by Chinese prostitutes. In the foreground, to the northwest, sits Kariakoo, a crowded slum where Chinese merchants flog refrigerators, air conditioners, mobile phones, and other cheap gadgets from narrow storefronts. To the south lies Tanzania 's new, state-of-the-art, 60,000-seat national sports stadium, funded by China and opened in February 2009 by President Hu Jintao.

"Statistics are hard to come by, but China is probably the biggest single investor in Africa," said Martyn Davies, the director of the China Africa Network at the University of Pretoria . "They are the biggest builders of infrastructure. They are the biggest lenders to Africa , and China-Africa trade has just pushed past \$100 billion annually." Davies calls the Chinese boom "a phenomenal success story for Africa ," and sees it continuing indefinitely. "Africa is the source of at least one-third of the world's commodities"-commodities China will need, as its manufacturing economy continues to grow-"and once you've understood that, you understand China 's determination to build roads, ports, and railroads all over Africa ."

Davies is not alone in his enthusiasm. "No country has made as big an impact on the political, economic and social fabric of Africa as China has since the turn of the millennium," writes Dambisa Moyo, a London-based economist, in her influential book, *Dead Aid: Why Aid Is Not Working and How There Is a Better Way for Africa*. Moyo, a 40-year-old Zambian who has worked as an investment banker for Goldman Sachs and as a consultant for the World Bank, believes that foreign aid is a curse that has crippled and corrupted Africa-and that China offers a way out of the mess the West has made.

"Between 1970 and 1998," she writes, "when aid flows to Africa were at their peak, poverty in Africa rose from 11 percent to a staggering 66 percent." Subsidized lending, she says, encourages African governments to make sloppy, wasteful decisions. It breeds corruption, by allowing politicians to siphon off poorly monitored funds. And it forestalls national development, which she says begins with the building of a taxation system and the attraction of foreign commercial capital. In Moyo's view, even the West's "obsession with democracy" has been harmful. In poor countries, she writes, "democratic regimes find it difficult to push through economically beneficial legislation amid rival parties and jockeying interests." Sustainable democracy, she feels, is possible only after a strong middle class has emerged.

In its recent approach to Africa, China could not be more different from the West. It has focused on trade and commercially justified investment, rather than aid grants and heavily subsidized loans. It has declined to tell African governments how they should run their countries, or to make its investments contingent on government reform. And it has moved quickly and decisively, especially in comparison to many Western aid establishments. Moyo's attitude toward the boom in Chinese business in Africa is amply revealed by the name of a chapter in her book: "The Chinese Are Our Friends." Perhaps what Africa needs, she notes, is a reliable commercial partner, not a high-minded scold. And perhaps Africa should take its lessons from a country that has recently pulled itself out of poverty, not countries that have been rich for generations.

"I would say this is a transformational moment for Africa," Moyo told me from London last spring. "I see the explosive development of infrastructure. I see people producing more food and having more jobs. And besides, I don't see how otherwise you are going to get a civil society, except by building up a middle class." Even taking the recent global downturn into account, this has been a hopeful time for a historically downtrodden continent. Per capita income for sub-Saharan Africa nearly doubled between 1997 and 2008, driven up by a long boom in commodities, by a decrease in the prevalence of war, and by steady improvements in governance. And while the downturn has brought commodity prices low for the time being, there is a growing sense that the world's poorest continent has become a likely stage for globalization's next act. To many, China -cash-rich, resource-hungry, and unfickle in its ardor-now seems the most likely agent for this change.

But of course, Africa has had hopeful moments before, notably in the early 1960s, at the start of the independence era, when many governments opted for large, state-owned economic schemes that quickly foundered, and again in the 1970s, another era of booming commodity prices, when rampant corruption, heavy debt, and armed conflict doomed any hopes of economic takeoff. China's burgeoning partnership with Africa raises several momentous questions: Is a hands-off approach to governmental affairs the right one? Can Chinese money and ambition succeed where Western engagement has manifestly failed? Or will China become the latest in a series of colonial and neocolonial powers in Africa, destined like the others to leave its own legacy of bitterness and disappointment? I was heading south on the Tazara-through the past and into the future, to the sites of some of China's most ambitious efforts on the continent-to try to get some early sense of how the whole grand project was proceeding.

The call to board the train came early, and I took my place in an orderly embarkation line in the departure hall, eventually walking down the central platform and past the luridly disheveled wreckage of a long-immobilized train. On the adjacent track, my train, the Kilimanjaro Express (which, curiously, goes nowhere near Mount Kilimanjaro), looked natty by comparison, its dark-olive paint unmarred. I clambered aboard and, after a brief confusion over seating assignments, settled with my three cabinmates into a tight little space with twin bunk beds along both walls and a table in the middle. Isaac Mpotia, a 50-year-old Tanzanian electrical engineer who had studied in Germany, sat by the window, directly across from me. He was taking the train home to Iringa, in southern Tanzania, I later learned, after a long stint doing engine work for the Tazara in Dar. He was quiet and a little somber while the train sat in the station, but as it lurched away from the platform at 3:50 p.m., right on time, he smiled. "Today," he said, "we are operating on German time." With a look of mischief, he added: "From here out, we can break down at any time."

The slums on the southwestern edge of Dar, where women pounded their evening meals in mortars and half-naked children waved, quickly fell away, giving over to thickening bush. With nightfall's approach, we

would be entering the Selous Game Reserve, one of the largest in Africa . (I had heard stories of collisions with elephants causing trains to derail.) All along the way, wreckage was strewn beside the tracks-railway cars hauled from where they'd derailed or broken down, and left to decay like great, dead beasts. As we looked out at these rusting carcasses, my cabinmates began talking about the railroad, and what it said about their societies. "This is a good train," said Isaac, with a trace of bitterness, "but like any piece of equipment, it needs maintenance." Daniel Simwinda, a voluble, Bible-toting Zambian, responded, "Everyone knows you can't keep getting milk from a cow without feeding it grass." (Daniel was bringing a shipment of auto parts and other goods south. As a commercial trader, he rides the Tazara as often as twice a month, and is well versed in its shortcomings.)

"As soon as we have problems, we ask someone else to take care of them for us," Isaac continued. "We ask the Europeans. We ask the Americans. We ask the Chinese. We will run this train into the ground, and then we will tell the Chinese we need another one. This is not development." I thought of the wreckage by the tracks. In China , there is no such thing as metallic waste. Armies of migrant workers scour the countryside with hammers and chisels, collecting and selling every scrap to the insatiable smelters that feed the country's industries. Here, by contrast, was a land without industry.

The World Bank and the United Nations did surveys for a Tazara-like line in the early 1960s, and both concluded that such a railway would be neither economically feasible nor sustainable. But China built the line, between 1970 and 1975, at the behest of two African leaders: Julius Kambarage Nyerere, the first president of Tanzania, who wanted to open up the remote south of his country and bolster his pan-African credentials; and President Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia, whose landlocked country was seeking an alternative to the trade routes south through white-ruled Rhodesia. Within a decade, the line was suffering from repeated breakdowns, landslides, and management failures. Planners had envisioned running 17 trains a day, but by 1978 there were only two. Tanzanians and Zambians tend to lay the railway's chronic operational problems at the doorstep of official corruption. Isaac and Daniel joked about this throughout the trip. For them, revenue-skimming explained every woe, from an unscheduled stop on our first night to replace a part, to an electrical short that plunged our stifling cabin into darkness after Daniel tried to turn on the cabin's antiquated fan.

As an example of top-down, state-driven development, the Tazara had also come up short. Planners had envisioned a new agricultural corridor nearly 10 miles wide on either side of the tracks, doubling regional food production. Yet much of the land-moist black soil and extraordinary verdure-was all but empty. The government had never invested in electrification, schools, or roads near the railway, nor had it provided access to credit so that farmers could buy fertilizer or good seed. During one 90-minute stretch in northeastern Zambia , beginning at Mkushi, I did not see a single farm or village. The unrealized value of this fallow earth seemed to pain Daniel. And he was quite aware of the opportunity that it represented to foreigners, especially with crops in rising demand worldwide. "The Chinese have already begun coming," he said. "They covet our land. It seems there's no space for people there."

Chinese farmers have been trickling into Africa for years, buying small plots and working them using Chinese techniques. But China began to prioritize large-scale agricultural investment in Africa around the time of the lavish 2006 China-Africa summit in Beijing , a milestone in China 's courtship of the continent. At the time, China promised to establish 10 agricultural demonstration centers promoting Chinese farming methods, and to send experts far and wide. Last June, the Economic Observer, an independent Chinese weekly newspaper, reported that China , "faced with increasing pressure on food security," was "planning to rent and buy land abroad to expand domestic food supply." Beijing had earmarked \$5 billion for agricultural projects in Africa in 2008, with a focus on the production of rice and other cash crops.

Many Chinese agricultural initiatives are shrouded in mystery. In 2006, for instance, China offered a \$2 billion soft loan to Mozambique for a project to dam the Zambezi River Valley , amid some of the continent's most fertile soils. The following year, Chinese and Mozambican officials reportedly signed a memorandum of understanding allowing 3,000 Chinese settlers to begin farming in the area. But following a local uproar, Mozambique 's government denied all reports of the plan, and little has been heard of it since.

Officials in Chongqing province-home to roughly 12 million farmers whose land either has already been lost in the flooding that accompanied the construction of the Three Gorges Dam, or is under pressure from urban growth in the province-have publicly encouraged mass emigration to Africa . In September 2007, Li Ruogu, the head of China 's Export-Import Bank, told the South China Morning Post,

"Chongqing is well experienced in agricultural mass production, while in Africa there is plenty of land but food production is unsatisfactory . Chongqing 's labour exports have just started, but they will take off once we convince the farmers to become landlords abroad." Li pledged full financial support to those farmers at the time, but has since distanced himself from those remarks. "China 's interest in agricultural investment-in land-is a hot-button issue," wrote Deborah Bräutigam, a professor at American University and a leading expert on China 's economic relations with Africa , in a recent paper. "For many, land is at the heart of a nation's identity, and it is especially easy to raise emotions about outsiders when land is involved."

The stop-and-go quality of major Chinese farming deals and the strong feelings that they've produced suggest that the honeymoon between the Chinese and Africans may not last long. During the course of my trip, land issues seemed to bring out the ugliest biases in the people I spoke to. "If you gave this land to Chinese people to work it, this place would be rich overnight," said one Chinese woman immigrant, a middle-aged trader in southern Congo : "They're too lazy, these Africans." Many Africans, for their part, were intensely wary of Chinese immigration; Daniel told me that this was a particularly raw issue among many of his friends. Conspiracy theories echoed frequently. In Dar, for instance, rumors had spread that the new national sports stadium was part of a secret deal to grant land to Chinese farmers in Tanzania .

Ultimately, the combustibility of Chinese farming initiatives may limit the plans' reach. Even so, Chinese investment in other industries has not slowed, and there's no reason to believe it will. The acquisition of the ores and oil underneath African soil is more easily hidden from public view than that of the land above. To fully grasp China 's economic approach in Africa, one must study European imperial history-as Beijing itself has been doing. "Recently, a very interesting Chinese delegation visited Brussels ," I was told by Jonathan Holslag, head of research for the Brussels Institute of Contemporary China Studies. "And they asked to see all the old colonial maps of the Congo . These are the only maps that reflect reasonably accurate surveys of Congo 's underground, and they want to use them for development plans in Katanga and elsewhere. If you look at Chinese policy documents, it is very obvious that they are focused on opening up the heart of the continent. There is clearly a long-term strategy for doing this, and it seeks to break up the north-south flow of minerals, to build east-west lines that will allow them to bypass South Africa ."

Jamie Monson, a historian of the Tazara line, writes lucidly about this strategy: To construct a railroad was to command a region-the most famous manifestation of this being Cecil Rhodes's dream of linking "Cape to Cairo " through a continent-wide rail connection. To control a region in turn was to keep rivals out, or at least to restrict their trade participation through tariffs and other regulatory interventions.

The truest intellectual forerunner of China 's strategy seems to be a plan once pursued by Germany . Before its defeat in World War I, Germany 's leaders had dreamed of a continental empire, a *Mittelafrika* stitched together by railways stretching from Dar es Salaam to the Atlantic Ocean . A northern line from Dar to Moshi was completed in 1912. German surveys of a southern route, essentially the forerunner of the Tazara line, were carried out between 1904 and 1907, but the project was abandoned after a local rebellion against German rule. Germany's railway schemes were driven by intense competition with Britain . Although China may claim to be a new kind of power, its plans, too, have always had a strategic component, including rivalry with the West, and lately a desire to circumvent the regional economic powerhouse, South Africa , and ultimately control the markets for key African minerals.

To succeed, Germany 's *Mittelafrika* would have required cooperation from Belgium and Portugal in order for its trains to traverse the expanse of Congo and Angola on their way to the Indian Ocean . In five short years, China has solved this problem, rebuilding Angola 's Benguela railroad and laying the groundwork for a vast new rail-and-road network to be built in Congo , Zambia , and other peripheral countries. China will not turn these railways over to African governments, as it did with the Tazara. Rather, it will retain majority

control of its rail investments, operating the railways until its money is recouped by ticket and cargo revenues and by other fees.

The Zambian end of the Tazara line, Kapiri Mposhi, roughly marks the southeastern edge of southern Africa's vast copper belt, one of Mittelfrika's choicest prizes. The Kilimanjaro Express pulled into town 72 hours after leaving Dar-we'd had two big delays along the way, but had been lucky to suffer no major breakdowns. A scrum of porters and drivers beset the weary, baggage-laden travelers on the platform, competing noisily for the chance to haul the merchandise brought from Tanzanian ports. I met Daniel's wife and son as we disembarked, and we eventually said our goodbyes (Isaac had gotten off the train farther north).

The town itself is a dismal backwater. A desolate market sits behind the giant train station, a jumble of cinder-block storefronts, almost all abandoned and strewn with rubbish. The commerce, such as it is, takes place in a muddy square facing these deserted buildings. There, a handful of crude stalls have been made by lashing rough-hewn wood planks together with cord. Women sit wanly before little pyramids of tomatoes, onions, and oranges. The train, evidently, has not brought prosperity to this place. Nonetheless, Kapiri Mposhi is a gateway to perhaps the most significant hubs of Chinese activity on the continent. About 120 miles to the south lies Lusaka, where Beijing's presence is long established and Chinese businesses abound. And about 45 miles to the north lies Congo, the stage for China's grandest experiment-and biggest bet-on the continent. I was heading to Lubumbashi, a Congolese mining city of 1.2 million people, where billions of dollars of Chinese investment are, for good or ill, just beginning to make themselves felt.

One of the largest and most populous countries in Africa, the Democratic Republic of the Congo is also perhaps the most star-crossed. It gained independence from Belgium in 1960 and promptly became the site of Africa's first coup d'état. It then suffered for 32 years under the dominion of the American-backed dictator Mobutu Sese Seko, the continent's most corrupt and influential despot. Over the past 10 years, it's been the scene of the world's deadliest conflict since World War II.

In spring 2008, Congo's beleaguered government unveiled a package of Chinese investments totaling \$9.3 billion, a figure later reduced, for complex reasons involving International Monetary Fund pressure, to \$6 billion-still roughly half of Congo's GDP. China will build massive new copper and cobalt mines; 1,800 miles of railways; 2,000 miles of roads; hundreds of clinics, hospitals, and schools; and two new universities. Speaking before the parliament, Pierre Lumbi, the country's infrastructure minister, compared the package to the Marshall Plan, and called it "the foundation on which the growth of our economy is going to be built." In exchange, China will get almost 11 million tons of copper and 620,000 tons of cobalt, which it will extract over the next 25 years-a "resource for infrastructure" swap that China first pioneered, on a smaller scale, in Angola in 2004. Congo will choose from a menu of Chinese construction companies-pre-vetted and supplied with credit by China's Export-Import Bank-which typically begin (and end) their work quickly, dispatching hundreds or thousands of workers to do the job.

Much of the Chinese mining activity will center around Lubumbashi, founded by Belgium in 1910 and built up with forced labor in the 1930s. Lubumbashi has long lived by the whims of distant global markets, its booms unflinching followed by busts. The Belgians, British, Americans, South Africans, and even the Congolese themselves, under Mobutu, have all enjoyed runs there. During my visit, the city was drenched in seasonal rains, but it bathes year-round in a deep-set shabbiness. Still, traces of charm and bygone ambition survive. An imposing whitewashed courthouse faces a large traffic roundabout circling an antiquated steam locomotive once used to haul copper-laden cars. The once grand European-style post office still stands, though its concourse is given over to Chinese merchants selling cell phones from rickety glass cabinets.

Evidence of Chinese industry is not hard to find in Lubumbashi. In many neighborhoods, Chinese road crews are busy sealing muddy, potholed avenues with asphalt. They're also paving an old dirt route east to Kinjama, and building another road west, to copper-rich Kipushi. Well before the new ore-for-development deal was signed, the city and its surroundings had become a sort of new Promised Land for Chinese fortune seekers. As copper prices rose fourfold between August 2003 and August 2008, thousands of migrants descended on the region, like forty-niners during the American gold rush. They were drawn by word of

mouth about the mineral riches and the ease of doing business here. Congolese officials were reputedly easy to bribe. Visas could be cheaply bought, and so could mining permits, often in the name of poor Congolese front men.

Under a white-hot afternoon sun, I made my way to a vast, Chinese-dominated industrial zone at the city's northern edge, where copper-smelting operations sat behind high walls. There, I met Li Yan, a brisk, 30-ish man who manages a medium-size copper-mining company. Li's company, with its giant smelting oven, heavy rock-crushing equipment, and half-dozen oversize trucks, looks well funded and well run. But he shook his head in disgust as he spoke to me about the copper rush. "There's a belief among Chinese people that they can realize anything," he told me. "But the people who came here had no experience and no preparation. It was like children running around, really a mess."

Many Chinese fortune seekers had hired African work gangs to dig for copper, sometimes even in Lubumbashi's red-clay streets. "They were profiteers and speculators," said one local businessman. "Congo got nothing from them." Most of them dug "no more than 20 feet deep, which requires no investment at all." The government belatedly tried to reassert control, requiring all those who mined copper to smelt it as well, and to make more-substantial investments in equipment, in order to generate more jobs and tax revenue and to make the industry more sustainable. In response, small operators scrambled to build small, inefficient furnaces. In 2008, as prices tumbled from \$9,000 a ton to a low of \$3,500, the makeshift smelters closed down and the Chinese owners fled, leaving their Congolese workers unpaid and the landscape littered with industrial refuse.

Beijing's giant construction package, of course, is on an entirely different scale than the fly-by-night mine operations that have come and gone in Lubumbashi. But the conditions under which the deal was signed were in many ways similar to those under which many Chinese fortune seekers had obtained their permits. Negotiations, conducted in secret, were entrusted to one of President Joseph Kabila's close personal confidants, a man without a government portfolio. Since then, questions about whose interests are being served by the deal—those of everyday Congolese, or merely those of Kabila's cronies—have multiplied.

In the center of Lubumbashi, just off the roundabout with the old locomotive, I met with Kalej Nkand, director of the Congolese Central Bank for Katanga province. Inside, the bank faintly resembles a musty warehouse-cavernous, dimly lit, and mostly open. It was getting toward lunchtime, and a half-dozen employees sat at metal desks scattered about the office's large open floor. One woman pecked at an antiquated computer; the rest read old newspapers or dozed. Kalej, a dapper young technocrat in a finely tailored olive suit, welcomed me into the deep chill of his office. In polished French, he told me that Congolese desperation had enabled the worst aspects of the early Chinese copper rush. "Most of these arrangements were negotiated at a time of great difficulty for the Congo because of the war," he said. "It was too easy for people to come, get their product, and take off." He described the big new Chinese package as "bait," with "terms that were a bit unconventional," but nonetheless appealing to a war-torn and bankrupt country.

For the rest of our conversation, Kalej studiously avoided criticizing the deal, often leaning forward and rocking slightly with his hands clasped before his face as he weighed his words. In Congo it was commonly said that President Kabila had bet his presidency on relations with China; for an official to say anything critical could be career-ending, or worse. "We've got to remember the expectations of the populace," Kalej said. New roads built under the auspices of the deal will link "rural areas with urban centers. People will be able to get their goods to market. The price of produce and other goods will go down." Such were the dreams for Tazara, too, I thought, remembering the depressing little market in Kapiri Mposhi.

There was also the nettlesome question of where the new roads would actually go. Many of the package's details have not been released publicly. Word on the street has it that the first, 275-mile section in the long, arching route chosen for the gigantic highway project will lead from Lubumbashi to Pweto, a one-gas-station town of 20,000 people on Lake Mweru that has no industry and few natural resources. Pweto is the hometown of Augustin Katumba Mwanke, the man who negotiated the deal, and he has reportedly built a

palatial residence there; with the highway in place, he'll be able to get to it from Lubumbashi in a few hours rather than the two days or more required now.

The company that will build the highway, China Railway, has been laying down another road leading out of Lubumbashi . It stretches eastward, and a crew of dozens of Chinese is working fast to scrape the existing dirt track smooth and complete the building of drainage culverts, before laying asphalt. This one, I discovered, leads to the regional police chief's estate, an immense domain complete with artificial lakes and luxurious guest houses, all enclosed behind a 10-foot-high electrified fence. As we passed, my driver warned nervously that the area was under electronic surveillance and stopping or slowing down would not be prudent.

A prominent Congolese lawyer who is part of a loose citizens' network that is investigating the Chinese package said the deal will leave Congo in the same position it was in after decades of exploitation by Belgium . "We could have said, 'You can have our copper, but we want some of it transformed here.' We've negotiated for billions of dollars without determining if those investments are productive, without thinking through the sequencing of things, without thinking about the creation of a metallurgy industry. We have cheap labor and abundant electricity," so refining would make economic sense. "But we negotiated without experts and without analysis."

I asked whether the huge building program—the roads and schools and hospitals—would produce dividends, and he shook his head grimly. "Six billion dollars in infrastructure is not development. Schools with desks are not going to educate our population. A road is not going to develop this country . Schools require a school system, and they need teachers. In this climate, roads last only 10 years without maintenance, and the Congo has no capacity in this regard." Gilbert Malemba N'Sakila, a former law-school dean in Lubumbashi , expressed similar doubts: "The Chinese are not even making use of Congolese talent. They hire laborers, and that's it." Management and technical expertise are provided almost exclusively by Chinese workers. "When they pack up and go, the Congo will be left with nothing, not even an upgrade in our human resources. Our earth will be dug up, emptied, and left that way."

These views echo—and are informed by—those in Zambia, Congo's copper-rich neighbor to the south, which has a much longer record of business dealings with newly capitalist China. Zambians enthusiastically welcomed investment in 1998, when the China Non-Ferrous Metal Mining Company bought a mothballed copper mine at Chambishi, near the Congo border, for \$20 million and promptly invested \$100 million in its rehabilitation. Things turned sour, though, when the new Chinese managers banned union activity and began paying Zambian employees less than the \$67-a-month minimum wage. In 2005, more than 50 Zambians were killed in an accidental blast at an explosives factory that served the mine; witnesses said that Chinese staff members had fled the scene moments before the explosion, failing to warn the African employees. A year later, during protests over back pay and work conditions, a Chinese supervisor opened fire on Zambian workers with a shotgun, wounding several.

The turmoil at the Chambishi mine quickly bled into Zambian politics. Michael Sata, the leader of the Patriotic Front party, made China 's business practices and growing presence in the country big issues in the presidential election of 2006; China threatened to cut off relations with Zambia if he won. Sata, whose party was young and relatively small at the time, won 28 percent of the vote. In the 2008 election, he won 38 percent, losing the election by just two points.

Few Zambians have been lifted into the middle class by Chinese mining activity, and today, Sata remains unrelenting in his criticisms of China . "Our [Chinese] friends are too numerous, and we know their resources cannot sustain them," Sata told me in his Lusaka office, taking phone calls from constituents and filling out a lottery card as he reeled off a catalog of reproaches. "Zambians do not need labor being dumped here. The Chinese are scattering all over the world, but there is no such thing as Chinese investment, as such. What we're seeing is Chinese parastatals and government interests, and they are corrupting our leaders." "The idea that big influxes of wealth will help Africa has never really panned out," Patrick Keenan, an Africa specialist at the University of Illinois , told me. "When the path to wealth goes through

the presidential palace, there are enormous incentives to obtaining power and to holding on to it. This kind of wealth incites politicians to create economically wasteful projects, and it relieves them of the need to make politically difficult choices, like broadening the tax base."

Indeed, the same objections raised by the Zambian aid critic Dambisa Moyo-that foreign aid breeds corrupt, lazy, and ineffective government-can be applied toward any foreign investments that focus on mineral extraction, especially ones that deliver cash and services directly to governments with no conditions attached. All things considered, resource-based or infrastructure-driven development-even development as massive as the ongoing Chinese wave-appear unlikely to lead to a meaningful African renaissance. China's rise, it is worth noting, did not begin with highways or factories or gleaming cities. It began with agriculture and rural development. "It is true that China has pushed infrastructure development, but that only began two decades after economic growth had taken off," says Justin Yifu Lin, who is the chief economist of the World Bank and the highest-ranking Chinese national in any international financial institution. "Providing economic incentive to farmers, incentives to workers, attracting foreign investment-those were the priorities at the beginning."

Many African farmers, Lin told me, "would strongly benefit from simple technology, like cheap diesel pumps to irrigate their fields." Chinese involvement in agriculture, he believes, could make a big difference. Through investment and demonstration, Chinese farmers could serve as an important catalyst in an African economic takeoff, much as they did a generation ago in China itself. But agricultural transformation is the most unlikely part of the Chinese project. Farming, of course, takes place in plain view, and foreign encroachment on fertile land raises passions; African governments are likely to find it easier and more profitable to sell oil and mineral rights. Song Tingming, an official at a Chinese agricultural trade group, told the Economic Observer that he believes the best time for China to develop agriculture overseas has probably passed, because the purchase of farmland has become a hot-button issue, with Korea and some Persian Gulf states having already made or attempted big farmland investments in Africa .

And ironically, while Beijing is extremely well-positioned to help Africa improve its governance-a second area of great need throughout much of the continent-it seems deeply reluctant to do so. No developing country has understood the importance of a strong, results-oriented public administration better than China . But so far, in part because of China 's history of subjugation by Westerners, as well as its defensive stance over its human-rights record, Beijing has remained attached to its rhetoric about noninterference.

Everywhere I traveled in Africa , people spoke in defense of conditionality-the attachment of good-governance strings to loans from the West. "Many people look at Western conditions as a good thing, because nowadays so many things can be discussed openly, unlike the past-like corruption, for example," said John Kulekana, a veteran Tanzanian journalist. "There are no more demigods here, and that is because of the growth of civil society, which has received lots of help from the West. Former ministers are called to account for their behavior. We are building accountability." Well-governed states-where the people have a real say in choosing their leaders, where national priorities are openly discussed, and where legal institutions are strong-will undoubtedly benefit in lasting ways from Chinese commercial partnerships. But commercial partnerships alone seem unlikely to lead to good governance or enduring prosperity. A see-no-evil approach to governance would leave many countries with depleted resource bases and stunted political institutions, even as their population continues to grow rapidly.

Africans' attitudes toward China 's recent initiatives on their continent are perhaps inevitably riddled with ambivalence. Many African intellectuals bridle at Western criticism of China 's African full-court press. The West, they say, has long patronized their continent, and since the end of the Cold War, has subjected it to outright neglect. And all of that is true. But the question remains: How does their continent overcome a pattern of extractive foreign engagement-beginning with its first contact with Europe , when gold or slaves were acquired in exchange for cloth and trinkets-that is still discernible today?

This question, which one hears almost everywhere, was addressed most powerfully by the Congolese lawyer I met in Lubumbashi . He received me in his office in his downtown home, where he bathes in water

collected from an old parabolic satellite dish, and where he says the mail gets delivered once or twice a year, after he pays a bribe to the post office. I asked him if the arrival of the Chinese was a new and great opportunity for the continent, as some have said. "The problem is not who is the latest buyer of our commodities," he replied. "The problem is to determine what is Africa 's place in the future of the global economy, and up to now, we have seen very little that is new. China is taking the place of the West: they take our raw materials and they sell finished goods to the world What Africans are getting in exchange, whether it is roads or schools or finished goods, doesn't really matter. We remain under the same old schema: our cobalt goes off to China in the form of dusty ore and returns here in the form of expensive batteries."

This article available online at:

<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2010/05/the-next-empire/8018/>

Copyright © 2010 by The Atlantic Monthly Group. All Rights Reserved.

---