

## Book review

*Sixty Years of Ghana-China Relations:  
Friendship, Friction, and the Future*  
Lloyd G. Adu Amoah (ed)

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REVIEW BY YOON JUNG PARK

Georgetown University  
Email: yp114@georgetown.edu

### Abstract

*Sixty Years of Ghana-China Relations*, one of only a handful of book-length treatments of a single African country's ties with China, chronicles the sixty-year history and delves into diplomacy of architecture, gastrodiploamacy, chronopolitics, racism with Chinese characteristics, and more. All in all, it provides wide-ranging analysis that balances both praise and critiques. An important volume that brings both depth and breadth to the ongoing study of Africa-China ties.

**Keywords:** Ghana; China; Ghana-China relations; Emmanuel Hevi; African agency.

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Afro-Sino relations require regular and in-depth reflection, and while shorter, academic articles covering the African continent's ties to China are plentiful, book-length analyses that cover single African countries and their linkages to China are relatively limited. This edited volume published in 2021 by the Centre for Asian Studies at the University of Ghana is one of only three full-length

books focused solely on Ghana-China relations. The first was published by the late Emmanuel John Hevi in 1963 and focused on his experience as a student in China. The second one, authored by Lloyd Amoah, was published in 2020 by the University of Ghana Press and titled: *Five Ghanaian presidents and China: Patterns, Pitfalls, and Possibilities*. The current volume, edited by Amoah, who also contributes two of the book's chapters, is dedicated to Hevi "for raising important questions on Africa-China relations" (ii).

The book under review focuses on and foregrounds Ghana in its relations with China. This emphasis is crucially important because (1) nearly all publications on this general topic begin with and give primacy to China and its activities on the continent and (2) most books tend to attempt to cover the entire continent and its relations with China, i.e., China in Africa or China and Africa (see Alden, 2007; Brautigam, 2009; Taylor, 2009, and Large, 2021, among others).

This book, one of a recent handful that focuses on one African country and its ties with China (see also Mnyandu, 2021 and Alden & Wu, 2021 on South Africa-China relations), drills down and covers different aspects of Ghana's ties with the Asian giant. It is worth noting that several of the chapters highlight the six decades of engagement, attempting to review and draw lessons from the long history. More importantly, several of the chapters highlight Ghanaian agency as demonstrated by workers, labor unions, government agencies, and Ghanaian elites (see Odoom, chapter 1 and Amo-Agyemang, chapter 5). This emphasis on African agency – a response to widespread narratives that demonise China's activities and portray African leaders and people as China's hapless and helpless victims caught up in a second "scramble for Africa" – is part of a growing wave of scholars pushing back and foregrounding African views, power, and leverage (Corkin, 2013; Mohan & Lampert, 2013; Chipaike and Bischoff, 2018; Odoom, 2019; Soule-Kohndou, 2020; and Wekesa, 2020).

Secondly, the book attempts to balance both praise and critique as indicated in the subtitle, "friendship, friction, and the future." About half of the chapters carefully point to the frictions that strain Ghana-China relations, while the others focus on the positive, including aspects of friendship, mutual benefit, and ways in which Ghana might learn from China in development strategies and diplomatic practices.

Finally, several chapters in the edited volume focus on Hevi's main concern in his groundbreaking book – the issue of anti-black racism in China. Amoah (chapter 4), Sibiri (chapter 6), and Graham (chapter 7) refer to "racism with

Chinese characteristics” (a term first used by Cheng, 2011) as a form of Chinese supremacy and argue that anti-black racism must be re-centered “if the putative and long-trumpeted solidarity and friendship between these two peoples is not to ring hollow and undermine their productive interactions going forward” (xx).

The edited volume covers a range of topics and themes, and the contributors include both senior and mid-career scholars as well as student and graduate student researchers and a practitioner from a range of disciplines. However, most of the authors come from political science and international relations fields, with some representation from public health. Amoah’s chapter on the diplomacy of architecture (4), Nani’s chapter on gastrodiplomacy (8), and Lomo-Kuditchar’s chapter on chrono-politics (9) are amongst the more unique topics covered in the book.

As with any edited volume, a range of research methods and theoretical framings create a bit of unevenness. Based on readers’ particular interests and background, some will find certain chapters more compelling than others. For this reviewer, the chapters that highlight the six decades of engagement and draw attention to lessons that should be learned (chapters by Pasquali and Wei, 2; Amoah, 4; Amo-Agyemang, 5; Sibiri, 5; Graham, 7; and Lomo-Kuditchar, 9), those based on qualitative research and engagement with local communities (Odoom, chapter 1) and those that were able to engage with the growing body of work on specific aspects of individual African countries and their ties with China or introduce new topics and themes were the most compelling for their historical, localized, unique, and/or comparative perspectives.

For example, Odoom’s chapter builds on the ongoing interest in China’s infrastructure engagement in Africa, his own previous work on this topic, and the growing body of scholarly work that attempts to unpack or reinsert African agency into Africa-China relations. His unique contribution is based on intensive field research and a focus on local level analysis; he brings critical (and often missing) local voices of workers, labor unions, and bureaucrats into these conversations.

Amoah, in chapter 4, also focuses on Chinese engagement in some of Ghana’s key infrastructure projects. While other work on Chinese construction projects have pointed to poor quality and labor concerns, Amoah also highlights the Ghanaian architects who were sidelined, the distinct lack of technological and skills transfer, and the (flawed) role of Ghanaian government officials in these decision-making processes.

Amo-Agyemang's chapter 5 on the role of African elites in influencing Chinese aid and development practices in line with their own priorities and leveraging African resource endowments as well as Amoah's chapter 10 on re-centering anti-black racism also make valuable contributions to the growing body of research on Africa-China engagements. Anti-black racism has been the topic of a growing number of scholarly works particularly after Covid-19-related events in Guangzhou, China in early 2020. Amoah reminds readers in compelling fashion that anti-African/anti-Black sentiment in China has historical precedent and is remains critical to whether or not Africa and China can, indeed, continue to foster "win-win" ties.

All in all, *Sixty Years of Ghana-China Relations: Friendship, Friction, and the Future* makes an important contribution and is a worthwhile addition to any library of Ghanaian international affairs, Africa-China engagements, African agency, and global race matters.

### **Biographical note**

**Yoon Jung Park** is Program Director of the new Africa-China Initiative at Georgetown University where she is also adjunct professor in African Studies. She is also the Executive Director and co-founder of the Chinese in Africa/Africans in China Research Network. Her research focuses on the people aspects of China-Africa ties: migration and migrants; ethnic, racial, and national identity; and race relations and affirmative action. She is the author of *A Matter of Honour: Being Chinese in South Africa*. (Jacana Media Pty (Ltd), 2008 and Lexington Books, 2009), editor of several special journal issues, and has authored dozens of journal articles.

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