

# TRUSTS AND DOUBTS IN AFRICA OVER BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE: A THEMATIC CONTENT ANALYSIS OF OPINIONS IN ETHIOPIAN TWITTERSPHERE\*

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*This study complies with research and publication ethics.*

## Abstract

China's Belt and Road Initiative is a massive infrastructural project that Ethiopia is encompassed. Yet, in Ethiopia, public opinion over the subject has never been homogenous as there are both apparent faiths that the initiative would positively contribute to Ethiopia's economy, and suspicions that it is merely China's veiled ambition to accelerate its expansion in global economy and politics, intensifying the concerns that China will not be any different from former colonial powers for African nations. Besides mainstream media coverage, much of the debate over this initiative has increasingly happened on social networking sites as attributable to their relative accessibility and autonomy. By employing a thematic content analysis of Twitter contents generated by opinion technicians during the 2019 Belt and Road Initiative Forum in Beijing, this article examines how opinion technicians over the Ethiopian Twittersphere discuss the initiative.

**Keywords:** Africa, Belt and Road Initiative, Ethiopia, technicians of opinion, *Twitter*.

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# AFRİKA'DA KUŐAK VE YOL GİRİŐİMİ ÜZERİNDE GÜVEN VE ŐÜPHELER: ETİYOPYA TWİTTER UZAMINDAKİ KANAATLERİN TEMATİK İÇERİK ANALİZİ\*

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*Bu çalışma araştırma ve yayın etiğine uygun olarak gerçekleştirilmiştir.*

## Öz

Çin'in başlattığı Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi, Etiyopya'yı da kapsayan devasa bir altyapı projesidir. Girişime dair Etiyopya'daki kamuoyu tartışmaları hiçbir zaman tek yönlü olmamıştır: Bunun sebepleri arasında Girişim'in Etiyopya ekonomisine olumlu yönde katkıda bulunacağına dair güvenin yanı sıra, Çin'in Afrika ülkeleri için bir yandan eski sömürgeci güçlerden farklı olmayacağı endişesi ve bir yandan da Çin'in küresel ekonomi ve siyasette genişlemesini hızlandırma konusunda örtük bir hırsla sahip olduğuna dair şüphe sayılabilir. Anaakım medyanın Girişim'e dair haberlerinin yanı sıra, Girişim hakkındaki tartışmaların çoğu görece erişilebilirliklerine ve özerkliklerine rağmen sosyal ağ ortamlarında daha fazla gerçekleşmiştir. Bu çalışma, Pekin'de 2019 yılında düzenlenen Kuşak ve Yol Forumu sırasında kanaat teknisyenlerinin Etiyopya *Twitter* uzamında Girişim'i nasıl tartıştığını *Twitter* gönderilerinin tematik içerik analizi üzerinden incelemektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Afrika, Etiyopya, kanaat teknisyenleri, Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi, *Twitter*.

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## Introduction

With the advent of the new media, opinion-making has no more remained an exclusive function of mainstream journalism. While not everyone is equally heard and accepted by societies, there happen to be individuals whose opinions become everybody's opinions, what Bourdieu (1998) calls "opinion technicians". These are persons "who write in the newspapers and intellectuals who advocate the 'minimal state'". Opinion expertise has become further visible now in the time of social media than perhaps any time in history. Social Networking Sites (SNSs) in particular have facilitated views and interpretations through possibilities of content production, networking, and immediate and broad reach (Hinton and Hjorth, 2013). As research on SNSs is growing rapidly and becoming interdisciplinary, the units of analysis come to be user interactions and relations, types of exchanges, contact frequency, intimacy, and type and size of networks (Papacharissi, 2009: 201, 202). Deller (2011), as well seems fascinated by relationships among media producers, public figures and texts, and the way *Twitter* offers a new way of researching and understanding these relationships.

Given that, in the current article, we attempt to analyze *Twitter* contents produced by opinion technicians during the 2019 Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Forum in Beijing about Ethiopia's partaking in the initiative and Ethio-Chinese relations. It mainly seeks to take texts and contexts of interactions by Ethiopia-affiliated opinion technicians, not necessarily Ethiopians by citizenship, as representational and signifying practices (Hall, 1997). The article desires to step in with a brief historical and contextual overview of Chinese relations with Africa and Ethiopia, the context of the BRI and Chinese massive infrastructural investment in the Horn of Africa, and Ethiopia's participation in the BRI 2019 Forum.

## Afro-China Relations Overview

A common downside in the conversing African relations with a foreign nation is the homogenization of entire Africa as a single unit of analysis by disregarding local particularities (Madrid-Morales and Wasserman, 2018: 1221; Dino-Gidreta, 2017). Nevertheless, Chinese first-ever antique connections with any separate African nation would inevitably be considered as its entrance into the continent. Although initial relations go as far back as first-millennium trade across Red Sea borders, as recounted by Venkataraman and Gamora (2009), contemporary China-Africa relationships are activated during the Cold War grounded on ideological imperatives of solidarity and anti-colonialism (Anshan, 2007), and China allied with newly independent African states on principles of equality, mutual interest and noninterference (Scobell et al, 2018: 173). As Scobell relates, later in 1971, China's search for allies in the international arena emerged productive when support from 26 African states helped China ensure passage of UN General Assembly Resolution 2758 (2018: 173).

China currently has diplomatic relations with almost all African countries and frequently engages in high-level exchanges and visits by which, from 2003 to 2014, Chinese leaders made 91 high-level visits to 53 countries in Africa (Scobell, 2018: 184). Chinese built luxurious AU Commission headquarters at Addis Ababa which is assumed to be a response to the commission's extension of official recognitions to China including a permanent AU membership. Indeed, it is believed, the commission was generally provoked by the Chinese extraordinary confidence in connecting with Africa in the new millennium. As trade and investment boost ups have become indicators of exceptional relationships, China's imports of oil and non-fuel mining products from Africa had more than doubled in the first decade of this new century (Alden and Alves, 2009). While gross annual revenue of Chinese contractors in Africa grew to \$1 billion by 2000 (Ehizuelen, 2017) its overall investments amounted to \$120 million by 2002 (Baah and Jauch, 2009).

Chinese state media have been funded to enable its voice heard globally while desires for cultural and ideological leaderships remain still at the center (Thussu, 2018: 120; Ji et al, 2016: 248). Accordingly, Xinhua opened additional news bureaus in Africa in 2009, China Daily launched an African edition in 2012 and CGTN launched a broadcast studio in Kenya. Benabdallah (2019) states that Chinese positive image was promoted directly by investments in media outlets like the CGTN Africa and indirectly through a long-term investment in vocational training and capacity-building programs for African media professionals. The second approach hinted at Chinese intentions for a soft power approach in Africa, a model of foreign relations based on attraction rather than coercion (Nye, 2004). While this is partly revealed by China's economic cooperation and infrastructure development, people-to-people exchanges, dialogues, visits, training, language institutes and mass media (Bailard, 2016: 447), there are differing views that Chinese involvement in Africa has been far from "soft" in the sense that it had not engaged in massive social cooperation programs as Turkey did, for instance. Chinese positive image in Africa is reinforced by state media coverage which is highly informed by pro-China interviews with government officials (Zhang et al, 2016; Wasserman 2018). Such a framing convergence of Chinese media outlets and African state-owned media would inevitably limit chances of critical views over China in Africa. Beyond a socio-economic venture, a "soft power" tactic, Chinese investment in a media outlet in Africa can be indicative of its desire in having a share in knowledge production which can, in turn, facilitate a power share (Hall, 1997; Foucault, 1972; Benabdallah, 2019).

Having gone through all these diplomatic, economic and social investments, China's venture in Africa is informed by two major diverging narratives, often viewed in binary terms which Wasserman (2012: 351) states "as either exploitative, predatory force or a benevolent, development partner". On one hand, it has been viewed as a progressive and refreshing break, and an alternative to a Western imperialist past (Condon, 2012; Karimah, 2019). On

the other hand, its suddenly heavy presence, and increasing penetration and dominance over the natural resource is doubted to be a mask for a neo-colonial venture (Anshan, 2007: 70). Following the Scobell it is possible to say that as Chinese political ambitions have later shifted to economic dimensions, its overarching interests have become access to natural resources, export markets for its manufactured goods, international political legitimacy, political stability and security to safeguard its citizens and pursue economic and commercial interests (Nicolas, 2017; Scobell, 2018: 174). Accordingly, China's economic activities get criticized for neo-colonial mercantilist ventures that exploited resources, undermined local industries and burdened governments with heavy loans for which countries had to use natural resources as collateral (Ursu and Van Den Berg, 2018: 5). This was further augmented by criticisms over controversial business practices, and failure to promote good governance and worker rights.

### **Ethio-Chinese Relations**

The history of Ethio-China relations is comparable with Afro-Chinese relations of initial on-and-offs and gradual intensifications. Indeed, Chinese arrival has transformed Ethiopia's past foreign relations which had set Ethiopia a mere Western aid recipient (Hackenesch, 2013). Though Emperor Hailelassie established diplomatic ties in 1970, the 1974 revolution which led to the emergence of the Derg regime as a close partner of the Soviet Union distanced Ethiopia's relations with China until the late 1980s (Venkataraman and Gamora, 2009: 18-19). Later bilateral relations began when Derg was replaced by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary and Democratic Front (EPRDF) in 1991. In 1995, Meles Zenawi visited China followed by Jiang Zemin's short visit to Ethiopia as part of his extensive Africa tour, and an ambitious Agreement on Trade, Economic & Technical Cooperation (ATEC) was signed. In 1998 a Joint Economic Commission (JEC) gave Ethiopia "most favored nation" status (Cabestan, 2012: 54). This particular agreement was followed by a series of warmth and undertakings, and during the first Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) meeting in Beijing in 2000, Addis Ababa was chosen to host the second forum in 2003 (Venkataraman and Gofie, 2015). In 2005, relations entered a new partnership widely read as the Ethiopian government's response to the Western criticism of the national election which was accompanied by violence and fatalities. Parenthetically, China's policy of "non-interference in others' internal affairs" become a golden alternative (Anshan, 2007: 72). However, Wasserman (2012: 341-342) notes China's role in Africa has already come under intense scrutiny by Western powers fearing their "good governance" agenda might be under threat from China which does not set the same conditions for investment.

The foundation for China-Ethiopia active trade relations goes far back to the second century AD when rhinoceros were exported to China, and

Abyssinia imported green tea (Venkataraman and Gamora, 2009: 10). Statistically, modern time trade exchanges have shown a dramatic rise as it is reported to grow more than ten-fold in the first decade of this century (Cabestan 2012: 57). Ethiopia mainly imports equipment, machines, electronics, garments, pharmaceuticals and edibles while it exports coffee, leather, textiles, sesame and cut flowers (Venkataraman and Gofie, 2015). Hosting Africa's largest livestock, Ethiopia has been producing leather, goatskin, and sheepskin since the 1920s, and so Chinese investment in Ethiopia has become more noticeable in the footwear industry (Cabestan, 2012: 57). China has also made multibillion-dollar investments in oil and gas projects (Chan 2017: 60), and its growing Industry Parks partly indicated a level of determination and intention for harmonization with Ethiopian development goals (Anshan, 2007; Scobell, 2018: 18). China has constructed Ethio-China Poly-Technique College at Addis Ababa and as Mandarin has already become helpful for Ethiopian traders, factory workers, diplomats and others, a 2011 signed agreement initiated the establishment of Chinese language centers at Addis Ababa, Mekele and Hawassa Universities (Cabestan, 2012: 55). In addition to the Chinese Embassy, the Chinese Commerce Minister, China-Africa Development Fund, Xinhua News Agency and China Exim Bank have independent representations in Addis Ababa.

The convergence of interests between Ethiopia and China has spread Sino-optimism among Ethiopia's elite and hopes among ordinary Ethiopians (Adem, 2012). Ethiopia remained a country that remained one of "sino-optimist" nations against the "sino-pragmatists" and "sino-pessimists" (Cabestan, 2012: 53-54; Leslie, 2016: 2; Skjerdal and Gusu, 2016: 150). However, it is generally assumed that potential factors attributed to China's preference of Ethiopia for broader partnerships include Ethiopia's natural resources, its strategic location and influence in the Horn of Africa (HOA), its economic growth, its hosting of headquarters of key organizations like AU and Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), and its emerging population of over 115 million which is the second in Africa. Chinese need for this cheap labor and more returns rose as industrialization and transnational corporations become integral aspects of the new Chinese capitalistic outlook (Baah and Jauch, 2009). Skjerdal and Gusu (2016: 149) discovers that Ethiopian media also differ in their coverage of Sino-Ethiopian relations as some underline the necessity and favorable nature of Sino-Ethiopian relations, others tend to focus on critical themes highlighting potentially neocolonial tendencies. As these critics extend, China has turned its attention to Africa perhaps not as much different from several imperialist nations of the past.

### **Belt & Road Initiative and Ethiopia**

In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced China's plans to build a "Silk Road Economic Belt" and a "21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road", now referred to as "Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)". The initiative is claimed to be a geo-eco-

conomic project involving around 70 countries along the land-based “belt” or the “maritime road” impacting more than two-thirds of the world’s population (Forough 2019: 276). BRI is proposed to improve investments, infrastructure and trade in Africa, Europe and Asia, and thus to facilitate greater global growth and development. However, beyond a mere economic initiative, the BRI seems to be a foreign policy priority for China and an essential component of restoring itself as a Great Power (Githaiga, 2019: 118; Leslie, 2020).

Based on the infrastructure construction Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the African Union (AU) in January 2015, China vowed to connect all 54 African countries with modern highways, airports and high-speed railways (Chen, 2016). Given that, Chinese companies started the construction of railways, airports, industrial parks and ports in Ethiopia, Djibouti, Kenya and Nigeria. As further commitment at the FOCAC in September 2018 in Beijing, China signed MoU with 37 African countries and AU on jointly developing the BRI (Renwick and Gong, 2018: 15). Initially centered on the broader Eurasia, since 2017 BRI has highly expanded to include Africa (Rolland, 2019), the HOA is becoming an immediate priority (Scobell, 2018: 194), and Ethiopia is officially included based on “non-regional member” (Githaiga, 2019: 119). Hence, Ethio-Chinese infrastructure projects already included a national and international rail network of about 5,060 km by 2020 (Cabestan, 2012: 59). The BRI seems a good chance for Ethiopia’s most ambitious plan aiming to link 49 cities and Ethiopian railways with those of Sudan, South Sudan, Kenya and Djibouti.

The Chinese introduction to Ethiopian railways goes back to 2010 when China responded to a call for tenders to rebuild a railway line linking Addis Ababa with Djibouti whose port accounts for about 70% of Ethiopia’s external trade. On that basis, instead of renovating the old 781 km of narrow-gauge railway built by France in 1917, a new 656 km single track extending to the Djibouti border is built close to the old one. This new railway is completed in 2018 and intended to improve import-export efficiency and link the country to the BRI (Ursu and Van Den Berg, 2018). This makes Djibouti and Ethiopia BRI’s connection points deep into Africa. A second notable project is the rail link from Addis Ababa to Afar where potassium can be extracted from the Denakil depression near borders of Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti. Another is the link between Addis Ababa and Bedele city, west of the capital and one of the main coal mining areas of Ethiopia, which eventually is projected to join the railway networks of the two Sudans and Kenya (Cabestan, 2012: 59). Such aggressive Chinese infrastructural engagement in the HOA, with a remarkable concentration on Ethiopia, has very much been associated with the BRI, which China has introduced to connect to and utilize its investment outputs from entire Africa.

With BRI becoming an ever-important cornerstone of China’s economic and political philosophy, increasing investments from China to Africa are on the horizon. Karimah (2019: 253) notes, recipients of these investments have to safeguard national interests, formulate consistent policies and ensure ef-

efficient regulatory compliance to extract the most possible benefits. In fact, China's approach to Industry Park development is said to be grounded on its intention to seek closer coordination and synergies with the growth and development aims of its development partners. Industrial parks in Ethiopia, for instance, are important components of BRI's role in implementing Agenda 2030 (Renwick and Gong, 2018: 18). Nevertheless, these massive infrastructure projects have led to a rapid rise in Ethiopia's borrowings from China as in 2011 China's share had increased to half of Ethiopia's total debt of about 7 to 8 billion dollars (Cabestan, 2012: 59). This, together with capitalist contentions and worker rights violation concerns has created some public anxiety over China, and so unavoidably over the BRI (Demissie, 2018). Leslie (2020: 6) warns that African countries must analyze and prioritize their own development needs before they engage in massive projects.

Even though all these ambitions and concerns have become important agenda in mainstream media and academics, it is through social media platforms that the new publics tend to engage in free conversations and reflections (Papacharissi, 2009). Imaginably, one can anticipate that the BRI, as an alternative globalization phenomenon, will remain a topic of academic and policy debates for decades. And so, any purposeful attempt of academic knowledge production on BRI and Africa will be a momentous contribution to the debates. Alongside mainstream media, social media users reflect a series of converging and diverging views ranging from endorsements, uncertainties and tough criticisms over the BRI. Regardless of the rising tendency that BRI related discussions are going virtual, not many thematic studies have given analytical considerations to exploring online debates. Accordingly, in the context of the broader Ethio-Chinese relationships, this study intends to examine *Twitter* contents produced by Ethiopia-linked prominent opinion technicians concerning the BRI. Users are considered for analysis for being content producers in connection with Ethiopia and the BRI, not essentially for their citizenship. The study is guided by a general question: How have prominent Ethiopia-linked opinion technicians discussed the BRI on *Twitter* in the context of the bigger Ethio-Chinese and also Afro-Chinese relations?

### ***Twitter* and Public Opinion**

The advent of social media platforms has enabled users to interact with each other in a virtual sphere leading to its adaption as public medium. *Twitter* is one of the leading platforms which are widely accepted by communication practitioners to represent public opinion (Brunns and Burgess, 2015; McGregor, 2019). These practices have been thoroughly studied by researchers in an effort to build a theoretical connection between these digital public spheres and the existing conception of discourse building (Bouvier and Machin, 2018; Kreis, 2017). Theorists have argued that the digital dimension of public opinion can also be understood and explained by the discursive pub-

lic opinion (Bouvier, 2015; Himelboim et al, 2013) which revolves around the key issues of the day in a society (Moy and Bosch, 2013). The process of forming public opinion about a socio-economical issue carries a strong normative imprint and is shaped by the informed members of the society (Gaisbauer et al, 2021). The existing literature confirms that user-generated content from *Twitter* can also serve as a digital representation of the discursive public opinion to understand how opinion leaders discuss and shape the debate about socio-economic phenomena (Bouvier, 2015; Daniel, 2019; Dyer and Hakkola, 2020; Jun et al, 2022; Kreis, 2017; Zain, 2021; Zain et al, 2020).

## Methods

As valuable as mainstream media journalistic contents, User-Generated-Content (UGC) within web 2.0 has already become an important subject of analysis to understand opinions (Hinton and Hjorth, 2013). UGC is becoming both alternative and supportive to mainstream journalism in the sense that prominent users have got chances of alternative consumption, and production, which would assist and even replace the roles of mainstream journalism. And while SNSs transformed the idea of social from spatial social to virtual, in terms of socialization, the online social is used mainly to supplement the offline (Papacharissi, 2009). Irrefutably, SNSs are increasingly becoming influential content distribution channels by a network of relationships (Van den Dam et al, 2008).

The microblogging website, *Twitter*, is growingly recognized for facilitating active and extensive public discourse (McCay-Peet and Quan-Hasse, 2017). However, not all *Twitter* users are of the same interactive status and style. While some prefer to follow those they know personally, others choose celebrities and public figures, news alerts and businesses (Deller, 2011: 218). Deller observes, most common tweets are one-to-many conversations in few statements as status updates, questions, or hashtags intending to be part of a wider discussion topic (2011: 218). Yet, comparable to that of content producers in the context of mainstream media, not all social media users have equal level of acceptance and influence among networks. In this regard, public figures like commentators, academicians, business people, and politicians have become thinkers in solving political problems in society (Bourdieu, 1998; Droit and Ferenczi, 2008). Hence, they tend to qualify as opinion technicians among the public by reflecting a dominant opinion and claiming a significant level of public acceptance. Bourdieu also calls columnists fast thinkers or technicians of opinion. According to Tangün and Parlak, there is a definite relationship between the pen of the columnist and the position of the newspaper where the columnist writes within the media industry and the newspaper's economic, cultural and symbolic capital. A technician of opinion has a certain habitus, which is derived from this *doxa* and has in close contact with the power of fields in any case (2020: 294-295). A technician of opinion frames

an opinion on a certain subject in a certain way and explains it ideologically. Thus, s/he serves the production of symbolic power. A technician of opinion at *Twittersphere* similarly reproduces and disseminates a certain symbolic power throughout the discursive practices.

To express dominant points of view in a society these opinion technicians are likely to construct a series of opinions by priming and framing. On that basis, this article predominantly relies on the analysis of opinions shared by technicians of opinion on *Twitter* with the assumption that they are representatives of dominant public discourse about the BRI (Zain et al, 2020: 12).

Thematic content analysis has been applied as proclaimed by Krippendorff as “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context” (1989: 403). At first, *Twitter* users are selected and filtered mainly as directed by hashtags and keywords related to BRI 2019 Forum. The guiding hashtags included #BRI2019, #Ethiopia #BRI, Belt and Road Initiative and #BRIForum. Afterwards, selected accounts are categorized as journalists, media outlets, diplomats, think-tanks, international relations or business experts and trade outlets. Python programming language is used to extract tweets through *Twitter* Application Program Interface (API) which extracts data using parameters like consumer\_key, consumer\_secret, access\_token and access\_token\_secret and provides important contents like usernames, account names, tweet IDs, number of retweets and likes, URLs and multimedia contents shared in the tweet and location (Zain 2020: 12). The period of the content included in the analysis is limited to 24 – 28 April 2019, from the eve to the day after the Second BRI Forum.

The qualitative analysis was carried out by *NVivo* software after additional cleansing is undertaken in *Microsoft Excel*. A list of accounts is identified and placed in respective categories based on their public profile to assess available interests and to understand the significance of their discourse practices. All 176 discursive contents from 37 opinion technicians have been subject to analysis and thematic discussion. On these bases, as major points of analysis, 34 sub-themes are identified under six main themes. For thematic discussion, each of the six themes is labelled as positive or negative in terms of their supportive or critical sentiments toward the BRI.

Frequency analysis of discursive texts reveals the nature and extent of dominant rhetoric practices and techniques adopted by opinion technicians. The most frequently used hashtags are #china #ethiopia #beltandroad #bri #kenya #beautifyingsheger #brf2019 and #focac. Whereas @fanatelevision @hmryder and @undpasiapac are the most stated usernames. The six dominant themes are the *Chinese dream of mutual cooperation, socio-economic development, opportunities for investment and growth, maritime silk road as more than a mere economic corridor, nature of projects and Chinese debt trap*. The top keywords include loans, debt, china, cooperation, ethiopia, framework, infrastructure development, grants, power, sustainability, trap, bri, jinping, af-

rican, beijing, lending, narrative, politics, relief, smart financing, agreements, aid concerns and electric generation. Yet generally, as it is limited to contents produced by selected users over a limited period, this work does not claim to be illustrative of the entire *Twitter* discourse over the BRI 2019 Forum in the Ethiopian *Twittersphere*.

## Discussion of Findings

### The Chinese dream of mutual cooperation

The basis for China's frequent claim for "mutual cooperation with Africa" seems bearable in the context that it has formerly backed anti-colonial struggles and independence movements in Africa, and in return, several African nations offered political support to China. In 1971, China reclaimed its UN seat with the help of 26 votes from African countries which Mao Zedong described as "We were brought back into the UN by our black African friends" (Anshan, 2007: 78). China has then supported African candidates for the UN Secretary-General position and better representation of Africa. Zhang, et al (2016: 17-18) also points out, China's major official media discourses and interviews with Chinese officials disclose the disposition that China wants its engagement in Africa to be seen as mutually beneficial, rather than asymmetric.

As time goes, however, Chinese frequent articulation of "mutual cooperation" seems indifferent from any other global powers' language of entry to Africa. Chinese aid and investment in Africa is rhetorically framed as "win-win" under the auspices of South-South Cooperation (Hackenesch, 2013: 12; Ursu and Van Den Berg, 2018: 3; Thussu, 2018: 118). No matter how collaborations would be based on agreements, political languages of mutual benefit do not unveil who benefits how much or how less. In that view, Thussu (2018: 118) indicates, BRI has intended to promote Chinese political and economic interests in strategically important regions, as an alternative to US-dominated security and economic infrastructure that has shaped the post-WWII world. Zain (2020) points out that BRI is driven by China's concerns about the security of trading routes. Given that, BRI has two securitization centers inherent in the Maritime Silk Road, Gwadar Port in the Indian Ocean shore of Pakistan and Djibouti in the Horn of Africa (Li 2019).

There are remarks that the relationship between Ethiopia and China has never been balanced obviously because China holds more bargaining power and can therefore exert political leverage over Ethiopian elites (Ursu and Van Den Berg, 2018: 8). Truly, Ursu and Van Den Berg asserts, "Chinese engagement tends to be elite-centered, and often works directly with the leadership of authoritarian regimes while neglecting the wider population" (2018: 8). Hence, questions arise whether most of the benefits on the Ethiopian side are going to elites, to the disadvantage of laborers (2018: 8).

Nonetheless, China has assertively wanted its gate to Ethiopia to be taken

as ‘mutual cooperation’ which would correspond to what Anshan notes as China’s attempt of establishing a spirit of “developing together” (2007: 72). From rhetoric practices of target opinion technicians under analysis, there emerge discursive signposts emphasizing that the BRI comes to conform to this Chinese idea of mutual cooperation. This can be assumed from prominently recurring choices of expressions like cooperation, year cooperation plan, technical cooperation and development cooperation framework.

*Endorsing Chinese technical cooperation to Ethiopia:* Following preliminary cooperation milestones, subsequent meetings get arranged under the name ‘technical cooperation’ in the sense that they are sessions during the implementation stages of agreements. In this regard, BRI Forums function as meeting occasions for side dialogues and further agreements. The *Twitter* discourse of Ethio-Chinese relations can be identified inclining to endorsing Chinese technical cooperation efforts toward Ethiopia, mainly involving its financing of infrastructures in Ethiopia, as signified by recurring terminologies like grants, funding or sponsorship. “#China sign agreements at #BeltandRoad Forum on: 1. Financing #BeautifyingSheger riverbank project 2. Grants for technical cooperation 3. Grants for food aid 4. #BRI 5-year cooperation plan 5. Operationalizing #FOCAC cooperation (CAB 25.04.2019)”.

*Ethiopia’s ambition in further Chinese investment:* It can be detected from texts subject to analysis that the notion of cooperation has also been utilized to imply mutual willingness and efforts, with some tone of direction that Ethiopia pleads for Chinese further investment. “PM DrAbiy Ahmed in Hangzhou also met with Mr Che Jun, Provincial leader of Zhejiang and exchanged views on cooperation b/n Ethiopia and the Province asked for more investment from the Province. The Province is sister province of the SNNPRS #ኢትዮጵያ(TTC 25.04.2019)”.

*“The Mutual” as emphasized by Ethiopia as well:* After Ethio-Chinese relations passed initial stages at the commencement of the new millennium, a series of annual events was sustained in the umbrella of summits, conferences and visits. Most of these events embrace the flagship of both or either of the two evident terms, mutual and cooperation. Although this happens to be emphasized mostly by the Chinese side, there emerge recurring hashtags and interactions that imply Ethiopia also stressed the idea of mutual interest. “Prime Minister Dr. Abiy today met with President Xi Jinping and with his Chinese counterpart and reiterated their commitment to further enhance the existing strategic partnership and stated that the relationship is based on mutual respect, trust, interest and equality (TTC 24.04.2019)”.

*BRI as development connectivity framework:* Ever since China has come to Africa, it has become a default predisposition that both sides emphasize the need for African development under certain development cooperation frameworks. Like most Chinese policies and practices towards Africa, the discourse on BRI itself comes to affirm it as a development cooperation framework

with a further role of deepening connections. “RT @UNDPasiapac: What is the #BeltandRoad? The #BRI is an economic and development cooperation framework that aims to increase connectivity (UC 25.04.2019)”.

No matter how contents under analysis echo typical account of cooperation familiar in contemporary foreign relations practice, this Chinese dream of cooperation has never been immune from suspicions and assumptions as being more of a Chinese strategic notion and a gateway into the heart of African governments and public.

### **Socio-economic development**

It became obvious that China won extensive recognition from the African side as a unique substitute for the politically colonial inclination of Western cooperation trends in the aftermath of colonization. Thus, contrasting that of African relations with the West, the discourse on Afro-Chinese partnerships has long emphasized more on socio-economic development and less on intense politics, generally putting aside the contentious political economy. In the analysis of the discourses of the target opinion technicians during the 2019 BRI Forum, this notion of socio-economic development becomes recurrent as characterized by several expressive preferences like sustainability, sustainable methods, debt sustainability framework, interest-free loans, development, high-quality development, development plan, development cooperation framework, democratic development, countries loans, and Chinese loans. For a better comprehension, this can be elucidated in clusters as quality development, sustainability and loan.

*Quality-development in the frontline:* As much as China’s emergence and active engagement is appreciated, qualities of Chinese constructed infrastructures in African countries have been under constant blame. Similarly, Chinese goods in African markets complained of low quality while there also exist attempts to show that often better and cheaper than local products (Anshan 2007: 82). With a consequent emphasis on improving the quality of its development works, China seems responsive to these concerns. And as BRI has been introduced as a giant Chinese initiative to catalyze socio-economic change among participating countries it is articulated as a unique development plan intended to bring high-quality development. This is also distinguishable within the contents of opinion technicians under analysis. Xi Jinping’s 2019 BRI summit address emphasized the need to focus on ‘high quality’ infrastructure as he urged for the promotion of high-quality development (EO 26.04.2019). “RT @PDChina: Chinese President Xi Jinping on Saturday called for joint efforts of all parties to promote high-quality development ... (CTW 28.04.2019)”.

*Sustainability in the frontline:* There has been a great emphasis on the need for sustainability of Ethio-Chinese development partnerships as revealed by the renewal of agreements. In that sense, the BRI can be recognized to be the

most durable project ever to assure sustainability of socio-economic integrations. While this is a weight by target contents under analysis, there exist opinions about the lack of sustainability of some Chinese projects. “#China’s Belt and Road Initiative is getting a makeover to tone down government rhetoric and tighten oversight, after allegations of corruption and a lack of sustainability dogged some of its highest-profile projects (KM 24.04.2019)”.

*Development loans in the frontline:* China is alarmed by existing concerns and critics about its alleged intentions of putting the nations in debt into its tactical cave of uncompromising their alternative foreign relations. As said, the objective of the Chinese DSF is to support the efforts of low-income indebted countries in achieving development goals (Anshan, 2007: 74). “China seems determined to counter the debt trap narrative. Beijing announces a debt sustainability framework at the BRI conference and offers some debt relief – as it just did for #Ethiopia. It may be politics, but it is a smart move nonetheless (JD 26.04.2019)”.

The rhetorical emphasis on DSF and interest-free loans would imply the advent of the BRI as stimulating energy for Africa’s development. In this case, African nations attain the benefit of Chinese loans as a chance to attain substantial infrastructural development based on a would-be-paid credit. “@hmryder’s four takeaways from Xi Jinping’s #BeltandRoad summit address: ... 3) More transparency and new debt sustainability framework... (EO 26.04.2019)”.

Nevertheless, a Chinese loan would also be read as a potential pretext for China to claim a part of indebted nations’ natural resources in cases of debt delays or failures. Demissie (2018) fears unless countries in Africa maintain long-term approaches the BRI could become a one-way path with China deciding upon development trajectories on Africa.

### **Opportunities of investment and growth**

Part of several African nations’ growth is assisted and still predestined by FDIs even though the growingly intricate politics of FDIs went alongside. In this sense, the BRI could be taken both as an investment itself and facilitator of investment outcomes in between China and African nations.

*Chinese investment in Ethiopia goes back to China as a trade item:* Ethio-Chinese relations have begun, and are mainly associated, with investments and trades. This become one of *Twitter* interaction affairs among prominent Ethiopian opinion technicians. “Ethiopia signed a 1.8 billion USD investment agreement with State Grid of China to provide power to the 16 Industrial Parks (Teshome Toga chanaka@TToga9, 24.04.2019)”. “#Ethiopia inks deal to boost #coffee export to #China-MoU signed between Ethiopia’s Ministry of Innovation and Technology under @DrGetahun and China Council for the Pro-

motion of International Trade #CCPIT (CAB 24.04.2019)".

*China as presenter of its model of technology for development and development of technology:* Any investment and infrastructural development will have a default consequence of improving Africa's technology consumption and overall operational capability. China claims to present its model of technology of development, and development of technology, to Africa. In this regard, Ethiopia has often been regarded as following a development path similar to that of China (Ursu and Van Den Berg 2018: 2). This general notion can be identified in opinion technicians' discursive emphasis on technology standards and the Chinese model of it". @Bhess 4/ While I'm a bit skeptical of that, it nonetheless reveals growing confidence that the Chinese model of technology standards and governance is gaining momentum as you and the NYT have pointed out (EO 25.04.2019)". Opinions also accentuate Chinese efforts in extending its model of cyber security to the global ranges. "@Bhess 3/ I was at a conference last year where several Chinese technology experts spoke glowingly of how GDPR in the EU was part of this trend and that Europeans were inspired by China's cyber governance standards (EO 25.04.2019)". In that view, Ethiopia would be among noticeable African countries to get the chance of consuming development technologies to be conveyed both in the course of the BRI and in the aftermath.

*Chinese debt as defied by Africans, and China's responsiveness:* The politics of Chinese debt is growingly getting attention by African critics who seem to be very much concerned about Chinese abruptly massive immersion into Africa. "Anti-debt populism has a powerful thrust of Sino-phobia, preferring an #Africa that deals exclusively with its traditional partners in the West. -- @profkagwanja (EO, 28.04.2019)". Perhaps cautioned by growing accusations that China maintained a calculated debt trap over-indebted African nations, *Twitter* discourse signposts China's considerable inclination toward easing debts. "More great data from @SaisCari who published a series of very informative charts on Chinese lending to #BeltandRoad signatories. Despite concerns over mounting African debt due to infrastructure loans, CN's overall lending is down from its highs in 2014 (EO 25.04.2019)".

### **Maritime Silk Road as more than a mere economic corridor**

*BRI as a wide-ranging development cooperation framework:* There is a common assertion that BRI has started as a typical economic corridor connecting many trades and industry centers (Thussu, 2018: 117). However, it has later revealed itself as a comprehensive development agenda. "... The #BRI is an economic and development cooperation framework that aims to increase connectivity (UC 25.04.2019)".

*An alternative globalization scheme:* In fact, developing literature and opinions as well widely consider this giant initiative as an extending idea de-

veloped mainly to catalyze the “Chinese dream of alternative globalization”. This would complement with remarks that China sought Africa as an ally in its struggles against imperialism and hegemony (Anshan, 2007: 73). Analysis of remarks from selected opinion technicians indicates a prevailing designation of BRI as the Chinese version of socio-political globalization beyond its mere economic functions. “#African Leaders are likely to carefully scrutinize the costs and benefits of Chinese loans; some may be poor, but that doesn't make them unaware or unsavvy. #China's #BRI isn't debt trap diplomacy: It's just globalization with Chinese characteristics' (MaledaBisrat @MaledaBisrat, 27.04.2019)”. “#cgtn published my article on eve of BeltRoadForum. China's #BeltandRoad Aids #Africa #Growth in New #Globalization/Africa and the World (LF 24.04.2019)”.

### Nature of projects

A significant part of the discourse on BRI and Ethiopia can be identified by rhetoric articulation on the nature of various Chinese projects in Africa. In this regard, Chinese involvement and provision of loans for power generation projects have gained extensive narrative consideration. The varieties of BRI-associated projects can be identified in *Twitter* opinion technicians' emphasis on tangible features and indications like standard gauge railway, world power, state power, stable power generation, power cities, and electric power transmission.

*BRI as infrastructural development initiative:* BRI has gained interpretative importance as an infrastructural development initiative mainly involving railways and bridges connecting major industrial centers like industrial parks in Ethiopia. “The top 5 #BeltandRoad projects in #Africa according to @cgtnafrica:1) #Kenya: Standard Gauge Railway 2) #Mozambique: Maputo Bay Bridge 3) #Ethiopia: Hwassa Industrial Park 4) #Egypt: the “Iconic Tower” 5) #Senegal: National wrestling arena (EO 26.04.2019)”. “RT- @PMethiopia-PM Abiy Ahmed met with the leadership of the China Railway Construction Corporation (CRCC) in Beijing, on the margins of the BRForum. CRCC's projects include connecting Ethiopia and Djibouti through the railway project (CAB 24.04.2019)”.

*Chinese desire for power generation and transmission in Ethiopia:* Ethiopia is attractive to Chinese companies, not only for the inexpensive labor as cheap as a quarter of the labor in China but also because electricity costs are among the cheapest in the world, both significantly reducing production costs (Ursu and Van Den Berg, 2018: 7). In contrast, opinions embark on Chinese companies' complaints about lack of transportation and stable power in Ethiopia. “@AsthanaRoli @Lindy\_Cameron @JaneEdm\_DFID @Siderop @lindacalab @rglenner 2/ Chinese companies in Ethiopia have been complaining about increased tax rates, poor transportation infrastructure makes the cost of connecting with suppliers more expensive and the lack of stable power genera-

tion in many regions can also have an impact on costs (EO 25.04.2019)".

There are consequential sentiments indicating ongoing agreements and frameworks to solve the issue of electric power transmission in Ethiopia. 'Ethiopia, China Sign \$1.8bln Investment Agreement Ethiopia and China have signed a \$1.8 billion investment agreement which covers the provision of electric power transmission and distribution lines (EEU 24.04.2019)'. Regrettably, however, contents signify that this issue of electricity in Africa is a yet to be lived experience. "@laurimyllyvirta 3/ But it's my understanding from several experts in African electrification issues that cleaner, more environmentally sustainable methods of electric generation are not yet at a price point where they can power cities like Kinshasa (12m people) or Lagos (21m people)... (EO 25.04.2019)".

*BRI is signifying China as a new global power:* Recurrent narratives toward the BRI also designate that it revealed Chinese emergence as a new global power. "Spanish foreign minister says, BRI reflects the reality that China is a world power (BRA 26.04.2019)". Yet, there arise some narratives with a slight tone of warning the people of China not to be keen on China being a world power. "@mywang999 Moreover, it's critical for Chinese people and other stakeholders to understand the negative reactions to this kind of thinking because, for the most part, they are largely ignorant about how this interpretation of state power is perceived by others around the world (EO 25.04.2019)".

*BRI as tied in with loans and debt sustainability frameworks:* Several African countries had the opportunity to get BRI linked loans from Chinese government banks. Many of them however are failing to stick to debt return deadlines for various challenges which the Chinese government come to be considerate about through a distinct DSF. "China seems determined to counter the debt trap narrative. Beijing announces a debt sustainability framework at the BRI conference and offers some debt relief -- as it just did for #Ethiopia. It may be politics, but it is a smart move nonetheless (JD 26.04.2019)". And evidently, the framework does not come as a uniform scheme for all contexts. "AS received correction that #China's pledge to write off Ethiopia's debt is related only to an interest-free loan, and not "interest on all loans", as was initially reported by @fanatelevision (AD 25.04.2019)".

This indication that China has given weight to power generation would lead to the implication that BRI could be intending to accelerate transportation of end-products of African hydroelectric power or electricity itself to meet Chinese future power needs. Seemingly, Chinese DSF interventions such as interest-free loans and loan write-offs come as a consequence of growing pressure from African opinion makers.

### **Chinese debt trap**

China uses three main instruments to enhance financial engagements with other states: grants, interest-free loans and concessional loans (Ursu

and Van Den Berg, 2018: 4). China's promises for loans to African countries has happened almost as early as its entrance to Africa. This meant a lot to several nations that would not otherwise have a chance to run infrastructural development projects by existing local capacity. On the other hand, there emerged discourses of concern that, first of all, the Chinese debt would be or has already become a regulatory trap to some African countries, in the sense that these countries' foreign relations get imprisoned under the indirect control of China. Secondly, Chinese contractors must be awarded infrastructure contracts financed by their loan and executed until full completion (Ursu and Van Den Berg, 2018: 5). Third, China uses loans as legal and moral excuses for the manipulation of natural resources of respective countries in debt. Debtor countries use their natural resources as collateral to access Chinese loans for investment. In the analysis of the discourses of African opinion technicians, the debt concern has been expressed by a range of terminologies like the Chinese debt trap and predator loans.

*The importance of scrutinizing the costs and benefits of Chinese loans:* Contents of opinion technicians subject to analysis tend to warn African leaders to be mindful of involving in the BRI. "#African Leaders 'are likely to carefully scrutinize the costs and benefits of Chinese loans; some may be poor, but that doesn't make them unaware or unsavvy. #China's #BRI isn't debt trap diplomacy: It's just globalization with Chinese characteristics' (MB 27.04.2019)".

*Chinese seemingly considerate reaction to its debt trends criticisms:* Again one can observe from the analysis of *Twitter* contents that the Chinese government has anyhow preferred to positively respond to criticisms over its debt trends in Africa. "China seems determined to counter the debt trap narrative. Beijing announces a debt sustainability framework at the BRI conference and offers some debt relief -- as it just did for #Ethiopia. It may be politics, but it is a smart move nonetheless (JD 26.04.2019)". Seemingly on behalf of less manipulative prospects, opinions happen to cheer a declining tendency of Chinese lending. "More great data from @SaisCari who published a series of very informative charts on Chinese lending to #BeltandRoad signatories. Despite concerns over mounting African debt due to infrastructure loans, CN's overall lending is down from its highs in 2014 (EO 25.04.2019)".

## Conclusion

No matter how tough restrictions would be, it can still be irrefutable that the new media has empowered a relatively free exchange of thoughts and research over interactions and opinions in social media has now become quite relevant. In Ethiopia, citizens and Ethiopia-associated foreign nationals have long enjoyed *Twitter* for criticism of undertakings including foreign relations and foreign direct investments to a level mainstream media have not granted. In terms of foreign relations, perhaps, Ethio-Chinese friendship has been one of the most intensive South-to-South relations ever recognized in the new

millennium. While this is comprehensible within the context of the broader Afro-China relationships, the last two decades have shown substantial achievements in manifold partnerships between Ethiopia and China. Relations resulted in the consideration of Ethiopia as HOA's crosslink of the BRI. So, ongoing Chinese infrastructure undertakings in Ethiopia in the region have already been projected to play crucial roles as China's gateway into Africa. While communication about this subject has been facilitated largely by mainstream media, in recent years, the new media has come to be a vital platform for the exchange of information and opinions; and content produced by social media opinion technicians has become a vital subject of analysis as evident in the context of opinions over the BRI. The BRI has captured the attention of social media opinion technicians and analysis of related *Twitter* contents reveals a significant level of participation among journalists, think-tanks, media outlets, diplomats and business experts.

An aggregate content over the BRI and Ethio-Chinese relations signposts the Chinese dream of mutual cooperation characterized by tendencies of endorsing technical cooperation to Ethiopia, and so the BRI as development connectivity framework. The discourse associates the initiative with socio-economic developments designated by quality development, sustainability and loans. Investment and growth desires happen to take discursive prominence as further revealed by inferences that Chinese investment products seem to return to China as trade items, and China presents its model of development to Ethiopia. Contents have displayed the Maritime Silk Road as a wide-ranging development cooperation framework and even a Chinese version of globalization, as an alternative to existing global supremacy engineered and controlled by the West for hegemonic advantages. Ethio-Chinese cooperation projects, including the BRI, by large come out to be infrastructural initiatives revealing Chinese intention of power generation and transmission in Ethiopia. No matter how tied in with extensive loans and debt sustainability frameworks, the BRI has ratified already prevalent opinions over China as an emerging global power. Evidently in the discourse, the issue of the Chinese debt trap remains a significant apprehension by which opinion technicians accentuate the importance of carefully calculating costs and benefits of loans, while to the Chinese side, some considerate steps seem to be taken as a response. Much of the discourse is largely directed to reassertion and promotion of the BRI and Ethio-Chinese relations consistent with dominant official and strategic texts propagated by both nations. Even though contents tend to disclose some degree of concern over the BRI, opinions seem to disregard further possible challenges of BRI and issues of corruption and mismanagement commonly associated with Chinese investments in Ethiopia.

COVID-19 was feared to shake most African countries given Africa's likely vulnerability due to people's closer social distance, relatively fragile health systems, inadequate sanitation and hygiene infrastructure, population mobility and conflicts. An immediate Chinese COVID-19 support to several

African countries revealed Chinese commitment to its relations with Africa in times of global crisis. Ethiopia was given the confidence to disseminate the initial Chinese COVID-19 support financed by the Alibaba Group to several African countries. Later on, Chinese vaccine supports come to tighten up Ethio-Chinese relations as Ethiopia received one of its highest vaccine aids from China. And evidently, the pandemic has highly impacted the BRI mainly revealed by the termination of funding and supply which resulted in an apparent pause in infrastructural construction and so financial diversions to COVID-19 emergencies.

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