

South Korea's Engagement with Africa: A History of the Relationship in Multiple Aspects, by Yongkyu Chang (ed.). Singapore, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, xviii + 196 p., eBook, ISBN 978-981-32-9013-6, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-32-9013-6_1

The expansion of political and economic relations between the Republic of Korea (ROK – or South Korea) and countries of Sub-Sahara Africa since the 1990s is reflected in a growing body of scholarly literature. Especially since the East Asian country became a member of the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC) in 2010, research on South Korea's engagement in countries of the so-called Global South has proliferated. As a latecomer in development cooperation and with the experience of an aid recipient South Korea has been looking for a niche in existing networks of "traditional" (i.e. Western including Japan) and "emerging" donors (including Chinaⁱ). The book under review is a welcomed addition to recent publications that focus to a large extent on South Korea's official development assistance (ODA) and its "autobiographic" featuresⁱⁱ, the country's own development experience and questions of transferability.

The edited volume under review provides, as the title indicates, a South Korean perspective on various forms of exchanges with Sub-Sahara Africa and covers three broader themes: the development and current state of African studies, South Korea's development partnerships as well as the country's civil and cultural exchanges with Africa. The book opens with a detailed account on the origins and institutionalisation of African Studies in South Korea since the late 1970s. Yongkyu Chang, a seasoned African Studies scholar, describes the current situation of African studies as "poverty in the midst of plenty" (p. 21), pointing at various institutional changes and challenges. Especially the rise and expansion of social sciences in the study of Africa – a development that is examined in Chapter 3 by Dong Ju Choi, Soojin Han, and Sooho Lee conducting a cluster map analysis of bibliographic information – happens largely at the expense of the humanities (a development that has been observed elsewhere and is, thus, not unique to South Korea). According to the authors, the increased scholarly interest in Africa is mainly the result of a growing demand for knowledge in the fields of economics and business, followed by ODA, and has to be understood in the context of broader political and economic developments as well as South Korea's "resource diplomacy" (p. 57). Chapters 4 and 5 cover South Korea's development partnerships with African countries. The contribution by Jin-sang Lee introduces the reader to the emergence and role of South Korea as a donor as well as main features, scale and scope of its ODA. The country's foreign aid decisions were not only shaped by its own experience as an aid recipient, but also by competition with North Korea for international recognition and legitimacy. Eun Kyung Kim and Mark W. DeLancey provide a case study of South Korea's relations with Ethiopia, a special relationship that goes back to the Korean War (1950-53). For many years, Ethiopia has been a top

recipient of South Korea's ODA allocated to Africa, and the authors reflect on whether the experiences gained in this particular partnership could help formulating a more general approach towards African countries (p. 111). The third thematic block covers cultural exchanges between South Korea and African countries as well as the role of South Korean civil society organisations (CSOs). In chapter 6, Suweon Kim assesses the political economy and South Korea's state-led cultural engagement with African countries, also from the perspective of political rivalry between South and North Korea. The last chapter (Ch. 7) by Sookhee Yuk focuses on the role and activities of the South Korean CSOs in Africa. Korean CSOs are diverse and face a number of challenges including limited resources, lack of experience and professionalism (p. 166).

As the summary shows, the book covers a broad range of topics that introduce the reader to the manifold and multi-layered aspects of South Korea's engagement with Sub-Saharan Africa. The main take-aways can be summarised as follows: First, the "original" African Studies in Korea were also affected by the academic debate (and allocation of resources) concerning the relationship between the "allegedly not theory-based area studies" and the so-called "'scientific' disciplines".ⁱⁱⁱ Moreover, the public and private sector required research on politically stable and resource-rich African countries. These aspects have resulted in a proliferation of demand-driven and usually financially incentivised research on a limited range of topics concerning Africa. Second, South Korea's aspirations as a middle power are underscored by the government's active role in the engagement with African countries, especially in resource development. The global promotion of South Korea's "development model" also needs to be understood in the context of middle power diplomacy. Whether the East Asian developmental state provides a vision and an option for African countries can be questioned – and the debate among scholars including Felwine Sarr is indicative for this perspective. Efforts to transplant the Korean approach to historically, culturally and institutionally different contexts fulfil, first and foremost, donor interests even though other motives (humanitarian, developmental etc.) play a role. Third, the 'North Korea factor' is still relevant and the authors illustrate well that South Korea's post-Cold War engagement with African countries cannot be understood without taking geopolitics into account. South Korea's diplomatic rivalry with North Korea and continuous efforts for international recognition have shaped the former's (and the latter's) policies and engagement in Africa.

The limitations of the edited volume concern the theoretical and conceptual contribution to the scholarly debate on e.g. South Korea as a middle power. An aspect that could have been explored more in depth is how features of the (neo-)developmental state are reflected in South Korea's engagement in Africa.

Moreover, while the chapters cover a range of relevant topics a central aspect of South Korea's engagement in Africa – trade, business and investment – could have been discussed more to make the book “all inclusive” (p. 2). The engagement of South Korean companies, particularly the large family-owned business conglomerates (*chaebol*), and their role in public-private partnerships (PPP) in Sub-Saharan Africa is of interest, especially since the (partly failed) land deal involving the *chaebol* Daewoo in Madagascar in 2008 received international media attention. A discussion of this or similar examples of South Korean companies' activities would be a valuable addition. Finally, and this aspect is probably owed to the fact that the book is written from a South Korean perspective, the representation of African scholarship is rather limited.

In sum, the book is a valuable contribution to existing scholarly works on South Korea-(Sub-Saharan) Africa relations. Its merit is to not only cover topics that usually receive less scholarly attention but also to include a section on North Korea's relations with African countries (pp. 137-140), which is crucial for a better understanding of the subject matter. Because of the diverse themes discussed the book is recommended to readers who are looking for a solid introduction to South Korea's multi-layered relations with African countries.

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ⁱ Even though China has provided foreign aid for decades, the country is usually described as an emerging donor and a member of the BRICS.

ⁱⁱ Williams, D. (2002). “Aid as autobiography”, *Africa* 72:1, pp. 150–163

ⁱⁱⁱ Basedau, M. and Köllner P. (2007) “Area Studies, Comparative Area Studies, and the Study of Politics: Context, Substance, and Methodological Challenges”, *Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft* [Journal for Comparative Political Science] 1:1, pp. 105-124; p. 108