

[H-Diplo Roundtable XXIII-13 on Benabdallah. Shaping the Future of Power: Knowledge Production and Network-Building in China-Africa Relations](#)

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H-Diplo ROUNDTABLE XXIII-13

Lina Benabdallah. *Shaping the Future of Power: Knowledge Production and Network-Building in China-Africa Relations*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020. ISBN: 978-0-472-07454-9 (hardcover, \$80.00); 978-0-472-05454-1 (paperback, \$29.95).

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China's emergence as a global power has generated endless speculation and debates in the international community. Is China's new assertiveness causing a global backlash?^[1] Is China challenging the liberal international order?^[2] Does China intend to export its governance model into many developing countries?^[3] Lina Benabdallah's *Shaping the Future of Power* provides a fresh and innovative analysis. Theoretically, the book offers a new framework for analyzing China and international relations. Empirically, the book examines China's interactions with Africa in three

policy domains: military, public, and cultural diplomacy. Benabdallah collected empirical evidence through extensive interviews, fieldwork, and discourse analysis.

This roundtable includes thoughtful comments from three international relations experts, Rita Abrahamsen, Renanah Miles Joyce, and Haley J. Swedlund. All three reviewers find much to praise, both theoretically and empirically. According to Abrahamsen, Benabdallah captures China's foreign policy transformations and centers Africa in the study of international relations. She notes that instead of focusing on material aspects of China's interactions with Africa, Benabdallah turns her attention to the "softer" sides of power, zooming in on the importance of knowledge production and people-to-people diplomacy. According to both Joyce and Swedlund, the book theoretically advances a new conceptualization of power and empirically examines how such an approach to power plays out in Chinese engagement in Africa.

While recognizing the strengths and contributions of the book, the three reviewers raise insightful questions. Regarding China's impact on the future of the liberal world order, Abrahamsen questions the book's focus on military cooperation and the provision of security training. She asks whether Chinese involvement in military and security training reinforce or disrupt some existing trends and patterns of civil-military relations in Africa. Joyce wonders whether China projects its power and influence differently than other major powers. Furthermore, both Joyce and Swedlund ask how different dimensions of power interact. Since power is both ideational and material, how does relational productive power interact with other forms of power? I am particularly interested in those

questions related to relationality and *Guanxi* in IR.^[4] While Chinese culture does emphasize relationality and *Guanxi*, the notion of relational power is also universally valid across different societies and nations. For instance, while highlighting China's network-building efforts in Africa, Benabdallah acknowledges that Western countries such as the U.S. and Britain also provide training to African militaries (90). If so, there is a question regarding how unique China's practice might be in terms of social capital investment and network-building efforts.

In my own view, Benabdallah has made significant contributions to the literature in several respects. First, the book enriches and broadens our understanding of power in global politics. Benabdallah innovatively combines theoretical ideas from both the West and the East. As a result, she challenges the conventional materialistic focus of power and puts relationality at the center in the book's analysis of power. Her framework of relational productive power is innovative and insightful, reminding us that "power is not formed prior to relationships" (56). Second, by focusing on China's social capital investment and network-building efforts, the book provides rich empirical evidence on China's engagement in Africa. Finally, the book helps readers make better sense of Chinese foreign policy in the developing countries. For instance, China's military presence in Africa might look marginal only when presence is measured as material/military power (69). However, if China's presence is examined more broadly through the framework of relational productive power, China's investment in network-building with Africa is more significant than conventional wisdom might assume.

In her response, Benabdallah discusses a few general themes and dilemmas. First, what does it mean to engage in IR theorizing from a post-Western perspective? Recognizing dilemma of pluralism and multiplicity in many approaches to IR, she emphasizes efforts to move beyond critiques and present

an alternative. Second, thinking about Africa's perpetual state of playing a host to great-power rivalries, Benabdallah asks the question: how do we generate knowledge, theories, and concepts that accommodate African perspectives? Finally, she highlights the changing nature of Chinese foreign policy and its implications for our analysis of China's global engagement. In addition, regarding the relationship between relational power and economic power, Benabdallah does not think we can parse the two out as distinctly as one might want. Still, she believes that we can explain their connections. Along the same direction, I would add a few reflections. How can scholars accommodate indigenous perspectives in the Global South while not ignoring the comparative and global perspectives? How can we recognize the cultural and practical differences across different nations and cultures without essentializing those differences? How do we analyze the entanglement and interaction among various elements of power? I agree with Benabdallah that there is no definitive answer to some of these questions. Perhaps scholars must carefully navigate the increasingly complex theoretical landscape of global IR while dealing with these questions.^[5]

Above all, *Shaping the Future of Power* provides a refreshing and innovative analysis of China-Africa relations and the future of power in global politics. The book sheds new light on Chinese foreign policy and opens new space for debates on international relations.

Participants:

Lina Benabdallah is an assistant professor of Politics and International Affairs at Wake Forest University. She is the author of *Shaping the Future of Power: Knowledge Production and Network-Building in China-Africa Relations*. Her research has appeared in several academic journals including *International Studies Quarterly*, the *Journal of International Relations and Development*, *Third World Quarterly*, *African Studies Quarterly*, and *Project on Middle East Political Science*, as well as in public facing outlets such as *The Washington Post's* Monkey Cage and *Foreign Policy*. Dr. Benabdallah is also a Johns Hopkins China Africa Research Initiative research associate and a contributing editor for *Africa Is a Country*. She earned a Ph.D. in political science from the University of Florida in 2017 and has conducted fieldwork in Beijing, Jinhua, Addis Ababa, Nairobi, and Bamako.

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Rita Abrahamsen is Professor in the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs and Director of the Centre for International Policy Studies (CIPS) at the University of Ottawa.

Renanah Miles Joyce is a postdoctoral fellow in the Program on Grand Strategy, Security, and Statecraft, jointly appointed at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the Harvard Kennedy School. She researches international security and U.S. foreign policy, with a focus on great power security assistance in the developing world. She has published articles in scholarly journals including

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Review by Rita Abrahamsen, University of Ottawa

There is little doubt that the rise of China as a major power is one of the most significant developments in international politics in the last two decades. Equally, there is no disputing the massive impact of China's presence on the Africa continent. The brilliance of Lina Benabdallah's book arises in large part from capturing both of these transformations simultaneously, and thereby centering Africa in the study of international relations. Unlike much early research on China-Africa, Benabdallah does not focus on China's immense appetite for natural resources to fuel its growth.^[6] Instead, she turns her attention to the 'softer' sides of power, zooming in on the importance of knowledge production and people-to-people diplomacy. Drawing on fieldwork, interviews and document analysis, the book reveals a dense network of investments in professional training programmes that forms an intrinsic part of Chinese foreign policy, and that helps to diffuse Chinese norms and values and ultimately underpins Chinese power in the world.

There is much to commend in this book, and also much to discuss. To my mind, a good book leaves its readers with as many questions as answers - and thankfully Benabdallah offers much food for thought, arising both from her rich empirical observations and the larger political queries concerning the implications of China's rise for the future of the liberal world order. In the spirit of constructive engagement, I probe some of these questions in the context of the book's focus on military cooperation and the provision of security training.

As Benabdallah observes in Chapter 4, entitled "Guanxi in Military Diplomacy and Security Trainings," much has been made of the opening of China's military base in Djibouti. Located barely a stone's throw from Camp Lemonnier, the home of the U.S. Africa Command, it has been seen as an indication of the new geopolitical struggle on the continent, causing more than a little unease among US and European policy makers.^[7] Benabdallah's approach, however, is not concerned with counting 'boots on the ground' and measuring military firepower. By focusing only on such conventional measurements of military might, she argues, we miss the more intangible - but equally important - aspects of China's military and security policy. Key among these are the rapidly expanding networks between high-ranking military officers from China and Africa and the production of expert knowledge through extensive training programmes for both public and private security personnel.

The chapter documents a multifaceted web of relationships, partnerships and exchanges developed in

the military and security sectors, following China's pledge to "help train African military personnel and support defense and army building of African countries for their own security" (71). African military officials are now routinely awarded with visits to the University of National Defense, which is the university of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA). They participate in training courses, take part in high-level summits or forums, and tour Chinese military facilities to marvel at their technology and intelligence capacities. On the African continent, Chinese peacekeepers who are involved in UN missions offer extensive training to African troops, while an increasing number of African private security guards are educated and hired by China's semi-private security companies.

These various types of training, engagements and networks not only serve to produce a more positive attitude and image of China among Africans. More importantly, Benabdallah argues, they also serve to diffuse Chinese values and norms, as well as Chinese ways of thinking about war, security, and civil-military relations. From a Foucauldian power/knowledge perspective, the production and diffusion of security knowledge shape the subjectivities of military and security personnel, and in turn influence how they understand and respond to perceived security threats. ^[8]

This is a significant insight, especially in light of the increasing militarism in many African countries. Benabdallah is careful not to overstate the effects of social networks and relationships on actual models of behaviour and governance on the continent. It would nevertheless be possible to go further, and to situate Chinese knowledge production and norm diffusion within the contemporary context of militarism and the study of civil-military relations on the continent. ^[9] In this way, it might be possible to bring out more clearly what Chinese soft power might mean for the continent and for the future of the liberal world order, even if it is premature to offer firm conclusions. With this in mind, let me suggest a few lines of inquiry and pose a few questions for further reflection, keeping in mind that this moves beyond Benabdallah's focus on the mechanisms of power and towards its effects.

A good place to start is Eboe Hutchful and Abdoulaye Bathily's classic volume on the military and militarism in Africa, which laments the continuing "problematic relationship of the African state with modern forms of organised force - the very basis of statehood." ^[10] The state, they observe, depends on such instruments for its survival, yet seems incapable of controlling them once unleashed, or of maximising their efficiency, or of exercising a legitimate and effective monopoly over them. Most African militaries were born from colonial power, and were originally designed to serve the needs of empire. At the time of independence, most armed forces were regarded as irrelevant vestiges of imperial rule, but soon came to play an outsized role in politics. By the 1970s more than half of all African states, and up to 65 percent of the continent's population, were governed by military regimes. The state, to paraphrase Hutchful and Bathily, clearly struggled to control modern military force.

During this period, much of the training and equipment of Africa's armed forces were delivered by the former colonial powers and by the U.S. and the USSR. Highly sought-after opportunities at prestigious military academies like Sandhurst and St. Cyr ensured that the armed forces - more than any other institution on the continent - continued to look to the outside world for professional reference groups and ideologies. In the words of Robert Price, "the ideologies, values and traditions"

that were “carefully impressed on the students” were “those of the European military.”^[11] If we fast forward to Benabdallah’s fascinating account of present-day Chinese military training, the question arises as to whether the ideologies, values and traditions that are now being impressed on African military officers are those of the Chinese, and, if so, what the likely effects on the “problematic relationship of the African state with modern forms of organised force” will be?

While no firm answer can be given at this relatively early stage of Chinese provision of training and military knowledge production, some tentative insights could be reached from a more careful analysis of Chinese military and security knowledge, values, and norms, and a discussion of the nature of Chinese visions of civil-military relations, of civilian and democratic oversight of armed force, and of the separation of military and police powers. Is the Chinese understanding of threats and how they should be countered significantly different from those of other military cultures? And how does Chinese involvement compare to the current interventions of Western states to reform, train and equip African forces?

This brings us to the issue of contemporary global militarism on the continent, and the question of how Chinese initiatives might impact and interact with broader trends and developments. While the frequency of military coups has declined and military rule is no longer considered legitimate in the eyes of the African Union, the strength and influence of the armed forces have arguably increased in many countries. This “new militarism” is fuelled in part by the numerous Western security and military partnerships on the continent and is promoted by a curious mix of military actors and various kinds of ‘do-gooders,’ joined together under the banner of the slogan ‘there can be no development without security.’^[12]

Initially in the late 1990s and early 2000s, many of these programmes were formulated as Security Sector Reform (SSR) and represented an effort to curtail excessive security spending. Military expenditure in poor societies was regarded as wasteful, if not morally reprehensible, and SSR sought to transform militaries and police forces by subjecting them to democratic, civilian control and instilling respect for human rights among officers and soldiers alike. Two decades later, close observers speak of the militarisation of SSR, and it is by now well-documented that SSR has increasingly come to emphasise the ‘harder’ aspects of security.^[13] Particularly after the attacks of 9/11, the technical dimensions of ‘train and equip’ have come to dominate over the more developmental and political aspects that are focused on democratic oversight, transparency, and accountability. At the same time, direct military partnerships and support for counter-terrorism activities by the U.S., France, Britain, and the EU have also increased, stretching across the continent from the Sahel to Somalia. On the surface at least, many of these security partnerships echo the same Chinese discourse of “helping Africans develop their own security” (71).

From the perspective of recent scholarship on global militarism in Africa,^[14] the key question that arises from Benabdallah’s ground-breaking book is thus whether, or to what extent, Chinese involvement in military and security training will reinforce or disrupt these trends and the historically established patterns of executive, elite control over the armed forces. In which directions will Chinese military philosophy steer the “problematic relationship of the African state with modern forms of organised force,” to return to Hutchful and Bathily? If they merely add to the coercive

capacities of Africa's security institutions, without at the same time strengthening democratic oversight and accountability, then the end result may be the entrenchment of authoritarian and non-democratic power structures supported by better trained and better equipped security forces. If so, 'the future of power' – the title of Benabdallah's book – could look very bleak indeed from the perspective of many African citizens, as well as for democracy, freedom, and the liberal world order.

In the interest of not ending on this utterly pessimistic note, let me emphasize that these are questions for further reflection and investigation, not conclusions. Moreover, militarism is of course not imposed from the outside, be it by China or diverse Western actors, but produced in interaction with domestic forces. As such, it is simultaneously local and global, and a key challenge of studying the forces that shape and structure contemporary militarism is accordingly to capture at one and the same time the local and global, and their intersection in particular locations. One of the many important contributions of Benabdallah's book is to help us think about how China fits into the production of contemporary global militarism, and how in turn African actors in various countries might react, respond, and possibly resist.

Review by Renanah Miles Joyce, Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard Kennedy School

In an era of increasing policy and academic attention to China's rise,^[15] Lina Benabdallah has written a timely book on a sweeping yet understudied facet of Chinese foreign policy in Africa—namely, its cultivation of social capital and relational power. *Shaping the Future of Power* theorizes what Benabdallah calls “relational productive power” (8), zeroing in on human resource development programs as a modest tool of statecraft with outsized effects. These programs, along with people-to-people exchanges, do two things. First, they allow China to create expansive relational networks with elites and regular citizens. Second, when these networks are institutionalized, they form spaces for expert knowledge production and norm diffusion, which Benabdallah identifies as mechanisms for building and projecting power (53). The book offers a wide-ranging empirical exploration of these networks across three domains of Chinese training and engagement with African partners: security, media, and cultural and education exchanges.

Shaping the Future of Power contributes to international relations theory by advancing a new conceptualization of power that extends Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall's concept of “productive power.”^[16] Benabdallah's concept of relational productive power focuses on people-to-people relations, integrating the Chinese concept of *guanxi*, or networks that facilitate business and political relations (9). “Power is not formed prior to relationships,” according to this new conceptualization. “It emanates from them. Power resides with the relations” (56). By demonstrating that rising powers deploy relational power as a means of influence, Benabdallah offers an alternative to theories that favor material explanations for power transitions.^[17] For scholars working on social power, the focus on Global South knowledge production and norm diffusion is a refreshing addition to a field that has often focused on North-South relations.

Although the book does not dwell on policy implications, there are many insights here that will

interest policymakers. The evidence shines a spotlight on a massive global flurry of activity that has until now received little systematic attention. Large movements of people and activities tied to training and exchanges often proceed under the radar, and are treated as technical transfers of skill bereft of much geopolitical impact. Benabdallah persuasively argues that these are “not some kind of neutral skills transfer activities” (61); rather, they are efforts to win hearts and minds, build networks, deploy knowledge, and shape interests and norms in other countries. More broadly, the book speaks to questions of perennial interest to policymakers: what are relationships worth and how can states cultivate them? [\[18\]](#)

Shaping the Future of Power opens with “a central yet complex question: Do all major powers project their influence and power in the same way? Or does China project its power and influence differently than other major powers?” (3). One of the limitations of the book is that it never conclusively answers this important question. On the one hand, maybe China is different. Benabdallah nods in this direction, suggesting that China’s approach to fostering social capital and network relations gives it a “comparative advantage” in the race for influence in Africa (3). Yet the factors that make China’s approach distinct are underspecified. The book suggests that culture matters; it also hints at structural or regime-type variables, noting that “conventional approaches” focused on (Western, democratic) established powers are insufficient for understanding how (non-Western, non-democratic) rising powers create influence (42). Left unclear is how regime-type matters or how power status factors in strategies for projecting influence. Perhaps, for example, rising powers rely on non-material forms of power to avoid provoking material competition prematurely or to legitimize alternatives to the established international order. [\[19\]](#)

On the other hand, maybe China is not so different after all. The book acknowledges that training and socialization are neither new nor exclusively Chinese undertakings. Even the elements that supposedly differentiate China’s strategy seem similar to those of other actors. For example, Benabdallah points to the language in China’s Africa documents on noninterference as distinct from European and U.S. militaries by officially advocating for “African solutions to African challenges” (72). Indeed, China is well-known for promoting norms of sovereign non-interference. But a comparative analysis shows that the U.S. military uses similar language in presenting itself as a training partner. Consider this official statement from U.S. Africa Command: “We believe in investing in and fortifying our African partners to enable ‘African solutions to African problems’—the bedrock of long-term self-sufficiency, security, and development.” [\[20\]](#)

By the book’s own measures, the United States appears to eclipse China in terms of relational power with African militaries. Between 2017 and 2018, the United States spent over \$250 million on training for 75,000 military personnel from 49 African countries. [\[21\]](#) According to the U.S. data, much of this training was intended to promote liberal norms and foster relationships, in contrast to the intimation that its activities in Africa primarily comprise counterterrorism. If anything, the fact that the United States trains so many military personnel supports Benabdallah’s main argument: great powers expend a significant amount of time and resources on activities that have very little rationale when viewed through a purely material power lens. However, these comparisons raise questions about whether we need a theory of Chinese relational power or whether this generalizes

across all powers. It also raises questions about how networks intersect. What determines relational power, for example, when African militaries are participating simultaneously in multiple networks with competing goals of knowledge production and norm diffusion?

Returning to the central question of whether major powers project influence in similar ways, the answer may well be “it depends.” Future research could unpack the different conditions under which major and rising powers build relational power as a complement or substitute for other forms of power. Comparison of efforts across training domains is also a promising line of investigation. For example, the United States provides more military training, but Benabdallah notes that China provides far more scholarships and training for African students than U.S. or European powers (119). Explaining these different emphases might reveal distinct beliefs about or interests in generating power.

The book raises other interesting questions about how different dimensions of power interact. Power is both ideational and material (93), but the material bases of relational power, and vice versa, call for more examination. The empirical evidence suggests that there are important interactions. For example, structural differences between African and European Confucius Institutes appear to influence relational power outcomes—European schools have different funding structures that allow them to retain more agency. The book locates power “within the networks of personal and professional relations and exchanges of gifts and favors that make China a powerful state with a development model that other governments are attracted to and seek to mimic” (56). But couldn’t the opposite causal relationship obtain, in which China’s economic power makes weaker states want to join elite and citizen networks in hopes of obtaining economic goods? In many cases, the gravitational pull seems to be China’s economic success, which causes government officials to be interested in emulating China’s policies and students to be interested in securing jobs (129). This does not negate the case for relational power, but it suggests a complicated causal relationship.

This complicated relationship might explain other puzzles, such as asymmetries in relational power. The book draws attention to asymmetries in China-African relations, with Chinese knowledge-makers and African knowledge-takers. Explaining these asymmetries might also help to address pervasive questions about African agency left mostly unaddressed until the closing pages of the book. Benabdallah suggests that state capacity might inform variation in African leaders’ ability to shape their relationships with China (147). This might also explain why some countries receive far more training programs than others. Another important factor to consider is how pre-existing norms affect receptivity to Chinese norms. For example, Paul Nantulya suggests that ideological ties dating back to independence movements explain why the Chinese party-army model has been well received in some African countries but met resistance in others.^[22] Considering the factors that shape African actors’ identities is a necessary step towards an agent-centered understanding of “how ideas spread.”^[23]

Perhaps the biggest limitation of the book is its ultimate inability to tell us if China’s approach to relational power works. This limitation is part theoretical and part empirical. Solving the theoretical problem requires defining relational power in ways that avoid tautology—namely, by defining power independently of network relations and vice versa. In theory, the book resolves this by explaining that the presence of ties alone is not evidence of power; rather, it is manipulation of networks that

produces power (55, 85). But power in this sense of manipulated networks is never fully defined, nor is there a clear explication of observable indicators that would allow us to measure power this way.

This problem persists in the empirical chapters, which are “concerned with examining the consequences of said investments” (62). The empirical strategy takes a two-pronged approach, first looking at official discourses and then examining practices on the ground (63). But these steps serve to establish the presence of networks more than to reveal their consequences. I had hoped for more demonstration of how networks have been manipulated to achieve desired ends. The chapter on media training offers some evidence, such as a dozen interviews that the author conducted with African participants in media trainings. The interviews suggest that training produces some influence—Chinese-trained journalists are “skeptical” of Western media and express appreciation for Chinese culture and values, while desiring to see their leaders negotiate more assertively with China (104). Similarly, Benabdallah’s interviews with students at Confucius Institutes in Addis Ababa and Nairobi, as well as African students at Chinese universities, find that students see personal value in their education and become more appreciative of Chinese culture (128-130). But to what end? Ultimately, systematic analysis of the effectiveness of China’s approach remains for another work to complete.

These limitations are perhaps more apparent because of the book’s ambitious scope. What the analyses lack in depth, they make up for in breadth. Benabdallah’s book represents a thought-provoking treatment of an important topic. The book outlines a rich and promising research agenda for future scholarship and is worth reading for academics and policymakers interested in better understanding China’s foreign policy and relational power.

Review by Haley J. Swedlund, Radboud University

When I first visited Rwanda over a decade ago, I was invited on my first night in the country to a Chinese cultural show at the national stadium. The performance troupe was traveling throughout Africa with the aim of exposing African audiences to Chinese traditional song and dance - even trapeze. The caliber of the performances was exceptional. But, what struck me about the show was not the skill of the performers. Rather, it was that the show started and ended with Rwandan Intore dancers. The inclusion of Rwandan traditional dance did not feel performative. It did, however, feel purposeful.

Lina Benabdallah’s book, *Shaping the Future of Power*, provides a theoretical framework for understanding these experiences and events not just as one-off cultural experiences, but as manifestations of what she calls “relational productive power” (8). According to Benabdallah, “A relational approach to power understands actors to be as powerful as their networks make them. Actors activate, build, and project power through their relations” (43). The Chinese cultural show I saw in Kigali exposed the audience to Chinese musical artistry, helping to build a positive image of China. And, the inclusion of Intore dancers at the start and end of the show was a powerful way to visually emphasize Chinese’s claims of mutual sovereignty and respect. It placed relations and people-to-people exchanges front and center.

In *Shaping the Future of Power*, Benabdallah argues that we cannot accurately understand Chinese

foreign policy in Africa—or indeed around the globe—if we don’t account for China’s emphasis on building social capital and *guanxi*; a Confucian concept that she translates as “connections” or relations.” In this context, Benabdallah argues that *guanxi* is “a manifestation of the power of relations with the goal of increasing one’s social capital through the medium of network-building, bonding, and *renqing* (人情), or “human feeling” (53). Material and/or realist interpretations of power miss these key aspects of China’s approach to foreign policy, because they simply aren’t looking for them.

In developing her theoretical framework, Benabdallah draws inspiration from the framework of faces of power,^[24] arguing that the fourth face of power—power as productive—is the most promising for analyzing Chinese foreign policy. However, departing from Lukes’ analysis, Benabdallah’s does not focus on cause and effect—or actor A’s ability to influence actor (47). Rather, her theoretical framework depicts power as a set of overlapping and complex relations and networks. Actors are more powerful where there are more nodes, more overlapping social relations (49).

To demonstrate the relational dimension of Chinese foreign policy, Benabdallah focuses her empirical analysis on Chinese government-sponsored professionalization trainings and people-to-people exchange programs in Africa. Three empirical chapters look at trainings and exchanges in the areas of military diplomacy and security, public diplomacy and journalism, and cultural diplomacy and Confucius Institutes. These chapters, which are built on qualitative fieldwork in Beijing, Addis Ababa, Nairobi and Djibouti, demonstrate the vast network of trainings and people-to-people exchanges being funded by China across the continent.

Such trainings target both elites and regular citizens—exposing them to Chinese ideas, values, and culture—while at the same time offering skills and increased prospects of employment at Chinese firms and business. Given the decentralized nature of funding for these programs, many of these initiatives fly under the radar. Through intensive data collection and on the ground fieldwork in Africa and China, Benabdallah exposes how extensive and vast such programming is.

In the empirical chapters, Benabdallah makes clear that, despite Beijing’s claims of equality, these programs are often very one-sided and “mutual learning” is limited. Nevertheless, the manner in which China presents itself in such programming—i.e., “as another developing country, as African states’ equal”—makes power relations less confrontational and thus more successful, according to Benabdallah (16).

In my reading, *Shaping the Future of Power* makes two important contributions to the international relations (IR) literature. First, Benabdallah convincingly argues that material and realist approaches to power miss key aspects of the way China (and possibly other states) exercise power. While Benabdallah’s empirical focus is Sino-Africa relations, her theoretical contribution (and critique) is much broader. In fact, what she is arguing for is radically rethinking how we define and measure power in international politics. Benabdallah is not alone in this,^[25] but her book does go further than most in that it lays out an alternative conception of power—relational productive power—and then empirically examines how such an approach to power plays out in a key contemporary case—Chinese engagement in Africa.

Second, and more specific to Sino-Africa relations, Benabdallah provides a powerful and important complement to the vast (and growing) literature on Chinese material investments in Africa. While Benabdallah does discuss key investments, like the Chinese military base in Djibouti, or the establishment of the African headquarters of Chinese Central Television (CCTV) in Nairobi, she purposefully focuses on professional trainings and people-to-people exchanges. As she rightly emphasizes, trainings and exchanges have been discussed much less in both the academic literature and in the popular imagination. However, they are a key element of Chinese engagement on the continent. According to Benabdallah, these exchanges are essential to understanding China's relational approach to power. It is through these types of initiatives that China seeks to build social capital and *guanxi*.

After finishing *Shaping the Future of Power*, I found myself convinced by Benabdallah's critique and overarching commentary on the limitations of traditional approaches to power. Both the theoretical framework and empirical analysis are compelling and well-articulated. What remained unclear to me, however, is how relational productive power interacts with other forms of power, and what the limits are to the approach.

Benabdallah is clear throughout that she is not dismissing material or cohesive forms of power, but rather shifting the focus to non-material—relational—forms of power. However, it is not clear to me how scholars of IR might conceptualize interactions between different types of power. While clearly co-constitutive, does relational power only work in conjunction with material or coercive power? Or can it stand alone? Without Chinese material investments like the base in Djibouti or financial support to UN peacekeeping, would Chinese efforts to train military forces throughout the continent have the same weight? Given that the answer is most certainly no, how exactly do material and relational power interact and mutually-reinforce one another?

In the conclusion, Benabdallah emphasizes that the boundaries between material and non-material types of power are not as clear as one might think. Instead of a dichotomy, the flow between them is fluid (142). Nevertheless, it remains unclear how scholars—both theoretically and empirically—should understand the interactions between these different ways of conceptualizing and measuring power.

Relatedly, what are the limits of relational approaches to power? This question was particularly on my mind while reading Chapter 5 - "*Guanxi* in Public Diplomacy and Trainings for Journalists." In this chapter, Benabdallah repeatedly references the challenges the Chinese have faced in making inroads in the African media market. Here she claims that, despite the commercial failures of CCTV in Africa, for example, professional trainings for journalists are evidence of the importance of relations and people-to-people exchanges to Chinese foreign policy. Fair enough. But, is this example not also evidence of the limitations of a relational approach to power?

As Benabdallah herself notes, many African countries rank higher than China in regards to press freedom (100), and civil society is strong throughout much of the continent. Does this particular case also suggest that relational power works best when there are shared values and norms? While Benabdallah convincingly makes a case that relational productive power matters—exactly how much and when is less clear.

Shaping the Future of Power is a rich empirical text on an important contemporary phenomenon. But, even more than that, Benabdallah asks big questions about how power is exercised in international politics. Although Benabdallah focuses on China in Africa, at times she also references how other powers—France or the U.S.—use relational productive power on the continent. An obvious extension of her work is a comparative project that compares the centrality of relational productive power across different state's foreign policy. But, given the centrality of China to contemporary world order, Benabdallah's critique is well-placed even if it only really applies to Chinese foreign policy.

In all the best ways, *Shaping the Future of Power* questions fundamental assumptions of international relations theory and provides an alternative way of defining and measuring China's power in contemporary global politics. For observers of Sino-Africa relations, the book gives new meaning to events and programs like the Chinese cultural show I observed during my first night in Kigali in 2009, casting them as a means to exercise power in a non-confrontational—but nevertheless formidable way. By providing a new theoretical framework for understanding how China exercise power, *Shaping the Future of Power* is a must read for all contemporary students of global politics.

Response by Lina Benabdallah, Wake Forest University

It is an honor for me to receive reviews of my book from scholars whose research inspired and illuminated my intellectual journey through the (often) narrow margins of the intersections of studying Africa and theories of International Relations.^[26] I would like to thank Rita Abrahamsen, Renanah Miles Joyce, Xiaoyu Pu, and Haley Swedlund for taking the time to reflect on my work. I also thank Andrew Szarejko and Diane Labrosse for organizing and facilitating this roundtable.

I am particularly grateful that the reviewers acknowledge the innovative approach that *Shaping the Future of Power* brings to the study of Chinese foreign policy in the Global South, and in Africa in particular. I thank them for their wonderful summaries of various aspects of the book. I will not spend too much time summarizing the book's arguments, but I will mention a few key ideas that shaped it.

The crux of the argument I make is with regards to understanding the operations of power-building in Chinese foreign policy towards African states. From various fieldwork observations, interviews, and materials collected, it became apparent to me that nurturing relationships, networks, and solidifying social capital were very important in the conduct of Chinese foreign policy towards Africa. The Chinese government offers thousands of seminars, exchanges, and training opportunities that bring together Chinese and African counterparts. When such routine exchange activities become institutionalized (especially under the auspices of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation), the exchanges and professionalizing trainings become hubs for networks to be formed or strengthened. They become hosts for knowledge production exercises and facilitate norm making and diffusing. Traditional or mainstream theories of International Relations do not capture well-enough this dimension of China-Africa engagements. Understanding power from social/human capital approaches is better suited for this particular aspect of China's engagement in Africa (and in the Global South more generally).

However, as I mention in the book, even though the modalities of power-building that we observe in China-Africa relations represent a very different image and role of Africa in global politics than colonial encounters, they remain actually quite hierarchical and unidirectional. Even though China-Africa engagements put a premium on concepts such as partnership and mutual respect with African delegations visiting China receiving red-carpet treatment, they are still largely a one-way deal with Africans as the trainees, learners, and recipients of much-needed Chinese knowledge.^[27] Asserting that the relationship is asymmetrical does not necessarily mean it follows the same logic, behavior, or investment strategies we typically see in Western powers' foreign policy towards Africa. Indeed, for these reasons, there is merit to studying the particularities of Chinese government-sponsored engagements in Africa on their own terms and not necessarily as a backdrop to how Euro-American hegemony typically conduct their relations with the continent.

Further to this point, an assertion that the book makes, perhaps a deceptively simple one, is that regardless of whether all powers act the same (with variance of what kind of threshold ticks them to become great or major powers) or will eventually act the same, it is important to understand actors on their own terms and not based upon some generalizable theories about the conduct of great power politics built mostly from Euro-centric perspectives. Yet, those who study Global China are aware, comparisons to the U.S and Europe are always looming in the background no matter how actively we try to steer away from them.

In the attempt to answer the incisive feedback that I received from the reviewers, I have decided to engage with themes that I think can be grouped as challenges of undertaking such a task (of presenting a post-Western case study in a theoretical and empirical way) and directions for future research. Therefore, instead of replying to each one of the comments, I will respond to the common threads in the reviewers' feedback with the occasional nod to particular elements here in there.

Starting from the broadest aspect to the most specific, I want to ask (and think through this via the comments in the reviews), what does it mean to engage in constructing and theorizing IR from a post-Western perspective? Sometimes I think of the dilemma of pluralism and multiplicity of theories and approaches to IR as existing on a spectrum of engagement which can range from "add Africa and stir" type of diversifying IR theories to creating a parallel universe (or a group of silos) of theories that do not communicate at all with the silo of Euro-centric IR theories that it critiques.^[28] Instead of staying in the narrow orbit of Euro-centric IR theories or merely critiquing how invalid they are in extending to the world beyond Euro-America, *Shaping the Future of Power* attempts to move beyond critiques and present an alternative, while recognizing the scope limitation of the case study. Yet, even I am not content with the work and ask myself how can we, as IR scholars interested in post-Western IR and in Global South perspectives to IR, move the debate forward on alternative perspectives without generalizing them (like I do from Africa to Global South for instance) and therefore falling in the grandeur traps of mainstream theories we critique? Should we retract to local theories of IR? How can we create humble pieces of the puzzle and still make them intelligible with other existing pieces?

Second, moving closer to the book's contribution, I want to think about Africa's seemingly perpetual state of playing a host to great-power rivalries between returning hegemony and hegemony that have actually never left. Abrahamsen's poignant concluding thoughts about the possibly bleak future from

“the perspective of many African citizens, as well as for democracy, freedom, and the liberal world order” made me think about this. How do we generate knowledge, theories, and concepts for International Relations theories that accommodate perspectives from African interlocutors who are often not viewed as contributing agents to IR theory?^[29] Here I also recall the words of Olivia Rutazibwa who asked at which point do we need to ask ourselves when this musical chairs game (of hegemonic rivalries in the continent) should end and when should we stop paying attention to the workings of power of said hegemon at the expense of the people whose lives are directly impacted by Great (and not so Great) power politics?^[30] These are excellent questions that I wish I had the answers to, but engaging in this sort of reflexivity is crucial for IR scholars interested in expanding the canon of theories, concepts, and ways of knowing and doing IR.

Last, and even more narrowly, I want to acknowledge the changing nature of Chinese foreign policy and what that means for the short/long term analyses on Chinese foreign policy in Africa (and elsewhere). When I first started researching this topic and conducting fieldwork trips for my doctoral dissertation, analysts (in the U.S and elsewhere) were describing China’s presence in the continent as “marginal” and I was trying to show the opposite^[31]. Since then, and for obvious reasons, the state of the field changed rapidly. Chinese foreign policy in Africa adjusted, adapted, and changed over that period of time, and it will continue to do so. Another puzzle that this puts before us as scholars of IR is to have the patience to see and acknowledge these deep yet rapid changes. Indeed, *Shaping the Future of Power* does not offer a conclusive answer to the question on whether China projects its influence in the same way other powers have in the past or in a totally different or novel way. I do not see the need to make a definitive pronouncement on this question precisely because I do not want to close the debate but open it up.

Chinese foreign policy is not static, the agency of African leaders is not static, and the reactions of publics, civil society organizations, and other actors are not static. I did not see the need to box in a conclusion that painted China-Africa relations one way or other. Instead, I wanted to offer a glimpse of what goes on in these relations when one centers people-to-people relations and investments in human capital. Certainly, as I mention in the book, other modalities of power are also present, and certainly this particular modality is not exclusive to China-Africa relations. This brings me to a final challenging point which Haley eloquently frames in her review. How, she asks, can we distinguish between relational power and economic power when investments in human and social capital development rely on sizeable budgets. I do not think we can actually parse the two out as distinctly as one might want to in an excel sheet with a list of variables. We can however explain their connections.

Notes

^[1] — Xiaoyu Pu and Chengli Wang, “Rethinking China’s Rise: Chinese Scholars Debate Strategic Overstretch.” *International Affairs* 94:5 (2018): 1019-1035; Luke Patey, *How China Loses: The Pushback Against Chinese Global Ambitions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

[2] — Alastair Iain Johnston, “China In a World of Orders: Rethinking Compliance and Challenge in Beijing’s International Relations.” *International Security* 44:2 (2019): 9-60; Jessica Chen Weiss and Jeremy L. Wallace, “Domestic Politics, China’s Rise, and the Future of the Liberal International Order.” *International Organization* 75:2 (2021): 635-664.

[3] — Suisheng Zhao, “The China Model: Can It Replace the Western Model of Modernization?,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 19:65 (2010): 419-436; Maria Adele Carrai, “Adaptive Governance Along Chinese-financed BRI Railroad Megaprojects in East Africa”, *World Development*, 141 (2021) DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2020.105388>.

[4] — *Guangxi* simply means “connections” or “relations” in Mandarin Chinese. Originally focusing on examples in Chinese society, social scientists have applied this idea to study social relations in different societies. See Katherine K. Xin and Jone L. Pearce, “Guanxi: Connections as Substitutes for Formal Institutional Support.” *Academy of management journal* 39:6 (1996): 1641-1658; Emilian Kavalski, “Guanxi or What is the Chinese for Relational Theory of World Politics.” *International Relations of the Asia-pacific* 18:3 (2018): 397-420.

[5] — Amitav Acharya, “Global International Relations (IR) and Regional Worlds: A New Agenda for International Studies,” *International Studies Quarterly* 58:4 (2014): 647-659; Andrew Hurrell, “Beyond Critique: How to Study Global IR?,” *International Studies Review* 18:1 (2016): 149-151.

[6] — Early commentary on China’s engagement in Africa often focused on resource extraction, see for example Wenran Jiang, “Fuelling the Dragon: China’s Rise and Its Energy and Resource Extraction in Africa,” *The China Quarterly* 199 (2009): 585-609. More recent work has broadened the focus, as exemplified by Chris Alden and Lu Jiang, “Brave New World: Debt, Industrialization and Security in China-Africa Relations,” *International Affairs* 95:3 (2019): 641-657.

[7] — See for example Jean-Pierre Cabesta, “China’s Military Base in Djibouti: A Microcosm of China’s Growing Competition with the United States and New Bipolarity,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, 29:125 (2020): 731-747; Arwa Damon and Brent Swails, “China and the United States Face Off in Djibouti as the World Powers Fight for Influence in Africa,” CNN, May 27, 2019.

[8] — Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Tavistock, 1970); Michael Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings* (London: Harvester, 1980).

[9] — Rita Abrahamsen, “Return of the Generals? Global Militarism in Africa from the Cold War to the Present,” *Security Dialogue* 49:1-2 (2018): 32-43; Moses Khisa and Christopher Day, “Reconceptualising Civil-Military Relations in Africa,” *Civil Wars* 22:2-3 (2020):174-197.

[10] _____ Eboe Hutchful and Abdoulaye Bathily, eds., *The Military and Militarism in Africa* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 1998). I discuss this book in more depth in Rita Abrahamsen, "Defensive Development, Combative Contradictions: Towards an International Political Sociology of Global Militarism in Africa," *Conflict, Security & Development* 19:6 (2019): 543-562.

[11] _____ Robert Price, "A Theoretical Approach to Military Rule in New States: Reference-Group Theory and the Ghanaian Case," *World Politics* 23:3 (1971): 399-430. See also Sunday Abogonye Ochoche, "The Military and National Security in Africa," in Hutchful and Bathily, eds., *The Military and Militarism in Africa*, 105-128.

[12] _____ Andrew Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans are Seduced by War*, Updated Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[13] _____ See Rita Abrahamsen, "Exporting Decentered Security Governance: The Tensions of Security Sector Reform," *Global Crime* 17:2-4 (2016): 281-295; Paul Jackson, "Introduction: Second Generation Security Sector Reform," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 12:1 (2018):1-10.

[14] _____ Abrahamsen, "Return of the Generals," (footnote 4); Linnéa Gelot and Adam Sandor, "African Security and Global Militarism," Special Issue of *Conflict, Security and Development* 19:6 (2019).

[15] _____ See, for example, David C. Kang, *China Rising: Power and Order in East Asia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Robert S. Ross and Zhu Feng, eds., *China's Ascent: Power, Security, and the Future of International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008); and Jessica Chen Weiss, "A World Safe for Autocracy? China's Rise and the Future of Global Politics," *Foreign Affairs* 98:4 (July/August 2019): 92-102.

[16] _____ Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall, "Power in International Politics," *International Organization* 59:1 (January 2005): 39-75. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/3877878>.

[17] _____ See, for example, Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers in the Twenty-First Century: China's Rise and the Fate of America's Global Position," *International Security* 40:3 (January 2016): 7-53. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00225; Michael Beckley, "China's Century? Why America's Edge Will Endure," *International Security* 36: 3 (December 2011): 41-78. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00066; and Ronald L. Tammen and Jacek Kugler, "Power Transition and China-U.S. Conflicts," *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 1: 35-55. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/pol003>.

[18] _____ Frank Lavin, "The Problem with Friendship," *The American Interest*, 17 June 2020, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2020/06/17/the-problem-with-friendship/>.

[19] _____ Works that engage with these ideas include Stacie E. Goddard, "When Right Makes Might: How Prussia Overturned the European Balance of Power," *International Security* 33:3 (Winter 2009): 110-42. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2009.33.3.110>; Randall L. Schweller and Xiaoyu Pu, "After Unipolarity: China's Visions of International Order in an Era of U.S. Decline," *International Security* 36:1 (Summer 2011): 41-72, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00044.

[20] _____ U.S. Africa Command, Statement of Gen. Stephen J. Townsend, Commander, U.S. Africa Command, 116th Cong., 2nd Sess. (2020): 6.

[21] _____ Based on data from the annual *Foreign Military Training and DoD Engagement Activities of Interest* reports published by the Departments of Defense and State, <https://www.state.gov/foreign-military-training-and-dod-engagement-activities-of-interest/>.

[22] _____ Paul Nantulya, "China Promotes Its Party-Army Model in Africa," *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, 28 July 2020, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/china-promotes-its-party-army-model-in-africa/>.

[23] _____ Amitav Acharya, "How Ideas Spread: Whose Norms Matter? Norm Localization and Institutional Change in Asian Regionalism," *International Organization* 58:2 (April 2004): 239-275. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818304582024>.

[24] _____ Michael N. Barnett and Raymond Duvall, "Power in International Politics," *International Organizations* 59:1 (2005): 699-732; Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (London: Macmillan, 1974); Steven Lukes, "Power and the Battle for Hearts and Minds," *Journal of International Studies* 33:3 (2005): 477-493.

[25] _____ Here Benabdallah builds on several scholars, including Michel Foucault, David Baldwin, Stefano Guzzini, and Qin Yaqing. See, for example: Baldwin, David. "Power and International Relations." In *Handbook of International Relations*, 2nd ed. Edited by Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse, and Beth A. Simmons, 273-297. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2013); Foucault, Michel. "Truth and Power." In *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings (1972-1977)*, edited by Colin Gordon (London: Tavistock, 1980); Guzzini, Stefano. "Relational Power." In *Encyclopedia of Power*, edited by Keith Dowding: 564-567. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2011); Qin Yaqing, "Rule, Rules, and Relations: Towards a Synthetic Approach to Governance," *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 4:2 (2011): 117-45; Qin Yaqing, *A Relational Theory of World Politics*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[26] _____ See Rita Abrahamsen, *Disciplining Democracy: Development Discourse and Good Governance in Africa* (London: Zed Books, 2000); Haley Swedlund, *The Development Dance: How Donors and Recipients Negotiate Foreign Aid* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2017); Xiaoyu Pu, *Rebranding China: Contested Status Signaling in the Changing Global Order* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2019); Renanah Miles Joyce and

Brian Blankenship, "Purchasing Power: U.S. Overseas Defense Spending and Military Statecraft," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 64:2-3 (2020): 545-573.

[27] _____ This builds on works by Abrahamsen critiquing the appearance of deploying language such as "partnerships" in development work. Rita Abrahamsen, "The Power of Partnerships in Global Governance," *Third World Quarterly* 25:8 (2004): 1453-1467.

[28] _____ I borrow 'add Africa and stir' from Abrahamsen, "Africa and International Relations: Assembling Africa, Studying the World," *African Affairs* 116:462 (2017): 125-139.

[29] _____ Again, here see Abrahamsen, "Africa and International Relations," on Africa being the site of data collection and theory testing rather than theory-building.

[30] _____ In a personal communication on May 5, 2021.

[31] _____ See for instance Saferworld, "China's Growing Role in African Peace and Security" January 2011 Report, <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/500-chinas-growing-role-in-african-peace-and-security>.