




## Chapter 4

# Theoretical Reflections on Knowledge Production and Teaching Africa: Insights from Africa–China Scholarship

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### Introduction

Knowledge production and the related implications for teaching have assumed a vital position in our knowledge-driven twenty-first century society. In the case of Africa, that is often misconceived and portrayed in a negative light, the issue of how knowledge is produced and taught becomes necessary. African universities, as centres for knowledge production and teaching, have embarked upon changes because of or in response to the twenty-first century forces of neoliberal globalisation. The changing role of the state, one feature of neoliberal globalisation, has given rise to the dwindling role of public resources for African universities. In response, universities have initiated various changes that coalesce around the idea of entrepreneurial universities (Feola et al, 2021; Puplambu & Wodinski, 2016). Key aspects of such universities include plans on how to utilise technology in knowledge production and

transfer, to the recruitment of faculty and students from beyond national borders.

Another significant aspect of entrepreneurial universities is the emergence of and partnership with new actors, both state and non-state, including for-profit organisations. In Africa, one major state actor is China. Africa-China relations have historical and contemporary foundations in developing nations solidarity, specifically the South-South Cooperation (SSC) and Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) respectively (Odoom, 2018). While the contemporary significance of China in Africa is often traced to President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, China's foreign aid programme since the start of the Cold War. The programme has been supported by "five principles of peaceful coexistence" and the "eight principles", which have been further distilled into two central elements: mutual benefits and noninterference in the internal affairs of any sovereign government (Gu et al., 2014). The implied win-win and non-interference model has been a critical feature of China's development assistance in Africa (Odoom 2017; 2021).

The resultant increases in and the varied forms of the evolving nature of the growing importance of Africa-China relations has positioned China as a major actor in natural resources development, digitalisation, and infrastructural support and relations with universities as part of a broader development assistance to the region (Puplampu, 2023; Odoom, 2018; 2017; Oshodi, 2023; King, 2013; Hodzi & Amoah, 2023). Thus, the African university environment offers an important space for constructing discourses relative to China in Africa (Carayannis & Olin, 2012; Oshodi, 2023).

The emphasis on African universities has given rise to a diverse group of scholars specialising in Africa-China relations on the African continent, in China and beyond who are all contributing to a deeper understanding of Africa and China. The emanating knowledge from different academic centres across the globe, bring multiple disciplinary perspectives and has the potential to elevate the capacity of African universities to contribute to knowledge about Africa. The question is the extent

to which the implied mutual, win-win relations in Africa-China relations play out when it comes to knowledge production, specifically knowledge that can undermine misconceptions about Africa (Nyamnjoh, 2022). This is because knowledge claims about Africa, influenced by its history, have been dominated by unidirectional Western perspectives, which are insufficient for addressing the continent's development. The issue is that no single region, including China, should dominate the discourse on African development (Crawford et al., 2021; Owusu, 2006).

This chapter draws on the above studies to examine knowledge production and teaching about Africa in a manner that will undermine misconceptions and the negative representation of Africa. The chapter contends that any attempt to enhance knowledge production and teaching about Africa must pay attention to decoloniality. The chapter therefore argues that the diversity in backgrounds and perspectives amongst African institutions and African-China scholars, in a decolonial framework, can open-up interdisciplinary perspectives on teaching about Africa. The theoretical implications for knowledge production and teaching about Africa are not problem-free. Knowledge production on both Africa and China, funding sources, and institutional structures, unlock new questions about the decolonisation of knowledge production, autonomy, and institutional capacity in Africa and beyond. By adopting a perspective that is attentive to the politics of knowledge production, the chapter emphasises the significance and implications of positionality and agency of knowledge producers in Africa-China encounters and studies. To address the research question, the chapter employs several data sources, including peer-reviewed studies and the grey literature on the African academy to examine knowledge production and teaching about Africa.

The chapter has four main sections. Section one examines the literature on knowledge production, decolonisation, and positionality relative to the African academy and Africa-China scholarship. Section two surveys the explosion or expansion of Africa-China studies, with many African universities and

knowledge centres offering courses and research engagements in Chinese studies and similar efforts in several Chinese universities. The third section offers an analysis of the research question, engages with the challenges and opportunities in decolonising knowledge production and teaching about Africa. The final section contains a summary, policy considerations and concluding remarks.

## **Knowledge Production and Decolonisation: A Theoretical Overview**

The key elements in knowledge are beliefs, ideas, and values in a systematic and broader intellectual environment (Mannheim, 1952). For contemporary African universities, the utilisation of knowledge in public policy, teaching and learning are critical in demonstrating their relevance in society (Puplampu & Mugo, 2020). Given the colonial milieu of African universities, their role in knowledge production and teaching are inextricably linked to the colonial orientation, hence the need to decolonise the knowledge produced in postcolonial African universities, especially in an era of neoliberal globalisation (Andrews & Khalema, 2023; Oyedemi, 2020; Luckett & Shay, 2020; Hountondji, 2009; Puplampu, 2006).

Three main issues in the literature pertinent to this study are as follows: the changing landscape of higher education (HE) in Africa; knowledge production and decolonisation of the African academy; and finally, arguments around curriculum and pedagogical outcomes. One phenomenon in the contemporary higher education landscape in Africa is the emergence of education hubs. Education hubs are the intentional elevation or concentration of a “critical mass of education and knowledge actors aiming to exert greater influence in the new education marketplace and to strengthen relations between local and international counterparts” (Knight, 2014:84). These hubs are therefore based on the desire by national or local policymakers to showcase their country as a magnet or centre for collaborative forms of learning as part of a wider process of utilising global imperatives like the flow of international capital,

recruitment of foreign students to enhance the competitiveness of the local higher educational landscape in a knowledge and service economy (Knight, 2014). Several African countries, like Mauritius, are positioning themselves as worthy sites for education hubs and other private initiatives in higher education (Knight & Motala-Timol, 2022). The key question is whether education hubs can transcend colonial knowledge and produce knowledge in a decolonial framework and thus elevate teaching about Africa or become just another market product with minimal social relevance.

The issue is that academic knowledge, because it is legitimised by social forces, is never produced in a vacuum. Accordingly, the overriding attention is an interrogation of knowledge production and legitimation in a decolonised context. The colonial problem revolves around several features that define the lived realities of the colonised subject (Maldonado-Torres, 2017). Specifically, decoloniality “entails not only scepticism of the a priori superiority of Europe, but also radical doubt about the lack of the full humanity of the colonized” (Maldonado-Torres, 2017:118). In higher education, any attempt at decolonisation must begin with the curriculum. The curriculum, in both its stated and hidden dimensions, defines the pedagogical approach and invites a spotlight on the relationship between educators and learners (Lockett & Shay, 2020; Puplampu & Mugo, 2020; 2023). The curriculum is the ladder that sets the course for learners in terms of how they learn, including skills and knowledge, the material to study, and systems of evaluation or assessment (Villet, 2022:230). Decolonising the curriculum and any learning or training system requires an active role of the educator, as the academic faculty or knowledge content expert, the knowledge itself and its significance in the framework of university and society relations. The operationalisation of the curriculum is determined by the philosophical orientation of the African university.

Villet (2022) identifies two philosophical orientations of African higher education – the traditional status quo approach and transformative approach. The former approach is grounded on the colonial experience that informed the establishment

and operations of the African universities (Neave & van Vught, 1994). In the environment in which the university structure was modelled on that of historical universities in the 'mother' country, it was not surprising that the curriculum did not align with the interests of the communities that host the universities (Villet, 2022:230). The irony of the situation was that in the postcolonial era, many African universities were named after their nations and presented as a major actor in the development discourse, but the universities did not live up to expectation (Puplambu, 2005). Analysts have attributed the failure of the African university to play its development role to both the proclivities of the African state in its relationship with the university and problems within the bureaucracies that govern African universities (Puplambu, 2006; Puplambu & Tettey, 2000). Consequently, the complex interactions of internal and external factors have undermined African universities as a site for a transformative agenda.

The latter philosophical orientation, the transformation approach, calls on African universities to focus on changes to the curriculum and pedagogical approaches that can utilise teaching and learning processes; that way, learners can be introduced to a sophisticated understanding of the human experience and better apply knowledge to resolving problems in their environment (Villet, 2022:232). Puplambu and Mugo (2023:206) consistently mention "the role of the curriculum and, by extension, how that frames the relationship between educators and learners." The transformation approach calls for new forms of knowledge production and an attention to positionality and agency. According to Banks (1993:5), positionality reveals "positions and frames of reference from which scholars and writers present their data, interpretations, analyses, and instruction." The transformative orientation therefore calls for agency on the part of both faculty and learners and the larger institutional structure of African universities.

Agency highlights a significant role for African actors in shaping knowledge production and global engagements. The renewed interest in the notion of agency has given rise to two contrasting perspectives. On the one hand, some portray

Africa “as if all structural constraints had fallen away,” while on the other, there are those who argue that “nothing has changed,” asserting that global inequalities persist, Africa remains dominated (Brown, 2012:1903). These extremes often depict Africa as either “hemmed in” or “seizing the twenty-first century,” “hopeless” or “hopeful” (Brown, 2012:1903). This binary narrative and reductionist approach hinders an enhanced understanding of the complexities within the concept of agency and fails to effectively illuminate persistent multiple dimensions.

Recent research in African studies, which build on the work of Anthony Giddens, the British sociologist, present philosophical and sociological reflections on agency (Brown, 2012; Brown & Harman, 2013; Tieku, 2013; Odoom, 2021). These perspectives challenge victimising approaches and provide a more balanced understanding of local processes at play in Africa. This chapter recognises the agency of African actors and contends that understanding the role of the African University in knowledge production necessitates amplifying the voices of its primary stakeholders while acknowledging the internal and external structures within which they operate. Such an approach aligns the social environment and knowledge in complex agent-structure interactions. These interactions lead to the emergence of social structures in which agents can disrupt the system or challenge established structures. In post-colonial Africa, the university stands as one such capable agent. As agents of knowledge production and teaching, African universities have the power to influence the structures within which they exist, just as they are shaped by them.

While not wholly decolonised, the African university holds a vital role in shaping African-China studies and relations, and understanding that the agency within it is crucial. Exploring agency of the African university in knowledge production that can change the misconception narrative about the region becomes imperative when considering the deepening Africa-China relations in higher education. Before addressing the possibilities of the African university in the suggested context,

the next section sketches relevant aspects of Africa–China relations and the African university.

### **Africa–China Relations and African Universities: A Survey**

The historical relationship between African institutions of higher education and their counterparts in the Euro–American region has undergone significant changes in the contemporary global era. This does not imply the absence or declining influence of Euro–American universities in Africa. Rather, in the last several years, there has been a noticeable surge in the expansion of Africa–China studies in academic and non–academic institutions or programming in several African countries and universities. The deepening and varied forms of inquiry reflect the evolving nature and importance of Africa–China relations and African universities have become an important arena for Africa–China relations in producing and promoting knowledge (van Hoeymissen, 2021).

The initial policy framework was the 2009 Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) agreement in Egypt. As the cornerstone for educational collaboration, China’s Ministry of Education launched China’s ‘20+20 Cooperation Plan’, the blueprint for establishing one–to–one partnerships between 20 Chinese and 20 African higher education institutions across 17 African nations (Gu, 2017). The plan which initially called for two partnership universities each in Egypt, Kenya, and South Africa, was extended to institutions in Botswana, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guinea, Namibia, Nigeria, Morocco, Sudan, Tanzania, Tunisia, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. These partnerships, designed to foster capacity–building and sustainable development, set the stage for the 2011 trilateral UNESCO–China–Africa meeting in Paris, where 44 university leaders deliberated on the theme of future collaboration between Chinese and African universities (King, 2013; Oshodi, 2023).

The intersection of higher education and Africa–China relations has led Egypt to be amongst the early adopters of academic cooperation with China. Then the University of

Ghana, Legon, introduced a Bachelor of Arts in Chinese within the Department of Modern Languages (Oshodi, 2023:216). This bilateral partnership was further strengthened with the establishment of the Confucius Institute not only at the University of Ghana, but several other African universities since 2013 (Table 4.1). By 2021, when China released the White Paper, *China and Africa in the New Era: A Partnership of Equals*, Confucius Institutes could be found in many African universities (Table 4.1). With some countries having multiple centres, there are sixty-one Confucius Institutes in forty-six African countries (MFA, 2021), with The Djibouti Institute the latest one to open in March 2023 (China.org, 2023). These institutes, complemented by over 30 Chinese language departments or majors in African universities, signify China's deepening cultural and educational footprint on the continent. While France and the US have historically established several cultural institutes in Africa (Trines, 2019), China's efforts are predominantly university-centric, highlighting a strategic emphasis on higher education.

**Table 4.1:** Confucius Institutes in Selected African Universities, 2013–2023

Country	University	Location	Year
Angola	Agostinho Neto University	Luanda	2015
Cape Verde	University of Cabo Verde	Praia	2015
Chad	University of N'Djamena	N'Djamena	2019
Comoros	University of Comoros	Moroni	2018
Democratic Republic of Congo	Diplomatic University of DR of Congo	Kinshasa	2017
Equatorial Guinea	National University of Equatorial Guinea	Malabo	2014
Ethiopia	Addis Ababa University	Addis Ababa	2013
Gabon	Omar Bongo University	Libreville	2017
Ghana	University of Ghana	Accra	2013
Guinea	Gamal Abdel Nasser University of Conakry	Conakry	2017

## How We Teach Africa Matters

Country	University	Location	Year
Côte d'Ivoire	Univ. of Felix Houphouette-Boigny	Abidjan	2015
Kenya	Moi University	Eldoret	2014
Madagascar	University of Toamasina	Toamasina	2014
Malawi	University of Malawi	Lilongwe	2013
Mauritania	Nouakchott University	Nouakchott	2018
Mauritius	University of Mauritius	Port Louis	2015
Morocco	Abdelmalek Essaadi University	Tangier	2016
Namibia	University of Namibia	Windhoek	2013
Republic of Congo	Marien Ngouabi University	Brazzaville	2013
Seychelles	University of Seychelles	Victoria	2015
South Africa	University of Johannesburg	Johannesburg	2014
	University of Western Cape	Cape Town	2018
Tanzania	University of Dodoma	Dodoma	2013
The Gambia	University of the Gambia	Banjul	2017
Tunisia	University of Carthage	Tunis	2018
Uganda	Makerere University	Kampala	2014

*Source: Adapted from: Oshodi (2023:220-221)*

Another layer in Africa-China studies was the presentation of narratives, hence the Africa-China Reporting Project at the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa (van Wyk, 2019). This project aimed to refine the quality of journalistic output on the interactions between Africa and China, providing resources and training to that end. The Africa-China Reporting Project partners with other media organisations such as The China-Global South Project and the China-Africa, Africa-China Research Network to provide training for African journalists and mentor graduate students on the reporting and writing on pertinent issues in sustainable development (Africa-China Reporting Project, 2019).

China's path in Africa's HE has not been confined to language and culture; it has broadened to include other sectors like construction, agriculture, and information and communication technology (ICT). This diversification of engagement is evidenced by landmark projects across several universities. For instance, a \$40 million university library funded at the University of Dar es Salaam was completed in 2018, and the Marien Ngouabi University library in the Republic of Congo with a dedicated Chinese section (Yang, 2018). Such projects, alongside the construction of the Malawi University of Science and Technology and a library at Lagos State University by Chinese entities, exemplify the tangible assets of this partnership (Oshodi, 2023). Similarly, Ghana and Nigeria represent contemporary milestones in Africa-China relations in infrastructural upgrades in higher education. They both host Chinese-built universities, with Ghana's first phase of the University for Health and Allied Studies completed in 2015 with the second phase ongoing at \$60 million. In Nigeria, a \$50 million Chinese-built Federal University of Transportation was presented as a gift in 2020 by the China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (Oshodi et al., 2022).

Moreover, Chinese ICT firms, most notably Huawei and Zhongxing Telecom Equipment (ZTE), have established a major presence in African universities through collaborations in software technology, infrastructure, training, and certification programmes. For instance, Huawei has engaged in partnerships with South African universities, notably launching a fifth-generation (5G) course for postgraduate ICT students at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) and the University of Pretoria. Huawei presented this initiative, which started in 2019, as the company's commitment to advancing the technological capabilities of future African ICT professionals (Abubakar, 2019). China's ZTE has, since 2018, been providing annual financial assistance to South Africa's Wits University students facing economic challenges, enabling them to continue their education. Earlier, in 2016, ZTE undertook the construction of the Ethiopian Education and Research Network (EthERNET) at a cost of \$50 million. This network interlinks 36 public

universities across Ethiopia, with the aim of facilitating educational exchanges and promoting a collaborative academic environment (Oshodi, 2023).

Perhaps, the improvements in infrastructure have contributed to African universities establishing dedicated programmes and centres focused on Chinese studies and Africa–China relations (See Table 4.2). The Sino–Africa Joint Research Centre in Kenya serves as a site for scientific collaborations. The University of Ghana’s Centre for Asian Studies (CAS), with Director Lloyd Amoah, trained in Wuhan University in China, has the goal to be a premier centre for innovative research, training and exchange programmes in African and Asian studies. Other centres include the Institute for Nigeria–China Development Studies at the University of Lagos and the Centre for Africa–China Studies at South Africa’s University of Johannesburg.

**Table 4.2:** Africa and China focused research centres in Selected African Universities

<b>Institutions</b>	<b>Location/Country</b>	<b>Year</b>
Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology: Sino–Africa Joint Research Centre, Chinese Academy of Sciences (SAJOREC–CAS)	Juja, Kiambu County, Kenya	2013
University of Botswana: Chinese Studies Programme	Gaborone, Botswana	2013
University of Dar es Salaam: Centre for Chinese Studies (CCS)	Dar es Salaam, Tanzania	2018
University of Ghana: Centre for Asian Studies (CAS)	Accra, Ghana	2015
University of Johannesburg: Centre for Africa–China Studies (CACS)	Johannesburg, South Africa	2018
University of Lagos: Nigeria–China Institute of Development Studies	Lagos, Nigeria	2018
University of Nairobi	Nairobi, Kenya	1970
University of the Witwatersrand: Africa–China Reporting Project (ACRP)	Johannesburg, South Africa	2013

<b>Institutions</b>	<b>Location/Country</b>	<b>Year</b>
University of the Witwatersrand: African Centre for the Study of the United States (ACSUS)	Johannesburg, South Africa	2018

*Source: Adapted from Bolin et al. (2022)*

One-on-one institutional innovative collaborations have also emerged, like the joint degree programme between Kumasi Technical University in Ghana and Weifang Vocational College in China, offering students a blend of local and international educational and professional experience in Mechanical Engineering and Building Technology. The University of Botswana and Moi University in Kenya have partnered with Chinese institutions to facilitate student exchanges and convene symposiums (Oshodi, 2023). Conferences and round-tables on Africa-China relations have become common events on African campuses, from the China-Africa Round-table at Wits University to the China-Africa Research Network's conferences in Accra and Nairobi. These academic interactions solidify the role of African universities as critical participants in the discourse on China and position them as key locations for Africa-China studies.

Africa-China studies in Africa are not limited to universities. Building on the diverse array of universities contributing to the study of China-Africa relations, in 2013 the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, under the Think Tank 10 + 10 Partnership Plan, announced a plan to establish sixteen think-tanks, evenly split between Africa and China. Despite some of these institutions lacking dedicated programmes or departments focused on China-Africa studies, affiliated researchers have published on the subject. This initiative, akin to the China-Africa Think Tanks Forum, appears to be strategically aimed at strengthening elite networks and fostering high-level discussions between Chinese and African scholars and policymakers (Bolin et al., 2022).

Thus, there is an increasing number of research centres, non-profit organisations, and various non-academic institutions that are actively involved in generating and

disseminating knowledge on the China–Africa dynamic. As illustrated in Table 4.3, some of these entities, including think-tanks and research centres, have emerged post-2012.

**Table 4.3:** Africa–China think-tanks, and research centres in selected African countries

Institute/Centre	Location/Country	Year
Africa Policy Institute: China Africa Centre (API-CAC)	Nairobi, Kenya	2013
Afro-Sino Centre of International Relations (ASCIR)	Accra, Ghana	2021
Collective for the Renewal of Africa (CORA)	Dakar, Senegal	2020
South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA)	Johannesburg, South Africa	1934
Southern African Research and Documentation Centre (SARDC)	Harare, Zimbabwe	1985
The Africa–China Centre for Policy and Advisory (ACCPA)	Accra, Ghana	2022

Source: Adapted from Bolin et al. (2022:56–60)

Amongst the newer additions is the Africa–China Centre for Policy and Advisory (ACCPA), based in Ghana. They conduct in-depth analyses, generate policy recommendations, and foster dialogue between African and Chinese stakeholders. These institutions can decolonise stereotypes by challenging simplistic narratives and highlighting the complexity and agency within Africa–China relations. However, if their funding and research agenda are heavily influenced by Chinese interests, they might perpetuate stereotypes by promoting a one-dimensional view that prioritises Chinese interests and perspectives.

There are parallel initiatives in China on African studies. Several studies have shown that China, with a relatively advanced capacity for examining its relations with Africa, has therefore been building and extending the foundation on knowledge in Africa since the Cold War era (Carayannis & Olin, 2012; Bolin et al., 2022). The FOCAC 2009 partnership

agreement, China's 20+20 Cooperation Plan, also engendered significant changes in the academic landscape in China. Prestigious Chinese universities, such as Peking University, East China Normal University, and Jilin University, have forged partnerships with African universities. These centres, which include Peking University's Centre for African Studies, Zhejiang Normal University's Centre for African Education Studies, and Tianjin University of Technology and Education's Centre for African Vocational Education Studies, have made notable contributions to the scholarly examination of Africa from a Chinese perspective (Bolin et al., 2022). This growth has mirrored China's strategic engagement with Africa, coupled with China-based networks and institutions that conduct research on Africa. Table 4.4 shows a selected list of research centres and institutions in China involved in producing knowledge and insights on China-Africa engagement.

**Table 4.4:** Selected China-based Africa focused university, research centres and institutions

University	Centre and Location	Year
Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS)	Institute of West-Asian and African Studies (IWAAS) (Beijing)	1998
China Foreign Affairs University (CFAU)	Centre of African Studies	2009
Communication University of China	African Communication Research Centre (Beijing)	2012
Jinan University	Centre of African Studies (Jinan, Shandong)	2010
Nanjing University	Research Centre of African Studies (Nanjing, Jiangsu)	1964
Peking University	Centre for African Studies (Beijing)	1998
Shanghai Normal University	Centre for African Studies (Shanghai)	1998
Yunnan University	Centre of African Studies (Kunming, Yunnan)	2007
Zhejiang Agriculture and Forestry University	Centre for China-Africa Agriculture and Forestry Research (Hangzhou, Zhejiang)	2012

University	Centre and Location	Year
Zhejiang Normal University (ZJNU)	Institute of African Studies (IASZNU) (Jinhua, Zhejiang)	2007

*Source: Adapted from Bolin et al. (2022)*

The foregoing, based on knowledge production and teaching about Africa, has implications for institutional capacity, the nature of the partnership and teaching and learning dimensions of Africa in China and vice versa. These and other analytical questions are addressed in the next section.

### **Decolonising Knowledge Production and Teaching About Africa: An Analysis**

Decolonising knowledge production and teaching about Africa aims to reduce misconceptions and stereotypes. This process involves addressing several critical issues. Three main inter-related factors will be discussed: the institutional capacity of African universities and the prospects of producing decolonised knowledge, the politics of knowledge production in a context of positionality and agency, and finally the practical implications for teaching about Africa in an interdisciplinary framework. Institutional capacity is about the attainment of goals and thus it is performance oriented. One noticeable theme to augment institutional capacity and aid the transformation of African universities is technology and innovation (Agbebi, 2018; Ehizuelen, 2018). The assumption is that technology would elevate both knowledge production, teaching and learning systems. As stated earlier, Chinese ICT companies, Huawei and ZTE, have been active partners in African HE. The challenge is that technology can become either an enabling or constraining variable in digital learning systems (Puplampu & Mugo, 2020). The Chinese ICT companies not only provided infrastructural support, for example, donation of computers and software, to African universities, but they also established training centres and certification programmes, ostensibly, to address the human capacity development problems in Africa.

Two emerging dynamic relations can be identified. First, the donation of computers per se does not automatically translate into institutional capacity. The role of the African academic to engage with the technology becomes an integral part of knowledge production and the subsequent teaching and learning experience. The neoliberal edit of a minimal role of the state, notwithstanding, the African state has to reengage and rethink its relationship with African universities, improve the heavy teaching loads, inadequate compensation so that the African academic can utilise digitalisation in knowledge production about the African condition. The second dynamic is that the training centres built by Chinese ICTs would be geared towards the production of skilled labour or human capital for the company's national operations. This is because the training centres will only augment the skills of labour for workers in, for example, Huawei and other in-country information technology (IT) companies. While the employment opportunities of those working in the IT field will contribute to poverty alleviation, the argument is the absence of any concerted link between the infrastructural support and knowledge production and teaching about Africa. Put differently, the curriculum that will inform the training centres would not necessarily create knowledge for addressing misconceptions about Africa.

The fundamental problem is that partnerships, including Africa-China relations, are not problem-free. For example, as Table 4.3 shows, there is a geographical concentration of the knowledge production centres around the major cities in which many universities and research centres are located. The concentration of universities and research centres in major cities, such as Accra and Nairobi, can only give rise to urban clusters and with the knowledge created being disjointed from the wider social environment, the ability of the ensuing knowledge to transform society would be minimal. Furthermore, there is a growing spatial distribution of China-focused institutions across Africa, yet there seems to be minimal presence of such growth in North African and Francophone countries. To produce a better knowledge about Africa, the spread of learning or research centres requires representation

in all regions of the continent. The contention is the need for institutional capacity for knowledge production and teaching to benefit the larger African community (Hodzi & Amoah, 2023; Bolin et al., 2022).

Another related difficulty when it comes to capacity and sustainability of institutions is the nature and terms of the collaborative research programmes as well as bureaucratic politics. African universities actively engage in collaborative research projects with Chinese institutions and experts. These projects often involve joint research teams, addressing pertinent issues such as sustainable development, technology transfer, and environmental issues. One notable collaborative research initiative, between the Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology (JKUAT) and the Chinese Academy of Sciences, focusing on renewable energy solutions in Africa, showcases the practical implications of academic collaboration in addressing shared challenges. In an analysis of this partnership, Puplampu and Mugo (2023) draw attention to the aid package that the Government of Japan also offered to JKUAT, arguing that the partnership that Japan forged with JKUAT, from the perspective of institutional capacity, was different from the one that China extended to universities in Ghana and other African countries.

Considering the different types of institutions involved in Africa-China relations, both on the continent and in China, the problem of bureaucratic politics cannot be ruled out. This is because institutions in both places will be vying for resources to support their knowledge production work. In such a context, the problem of institutional turf and the associated struggle for resources will be worsened by the absence of any integrative approach to institutional performance. These problems are largely magnified in the case of the African countries, especially in the case of university-based institutions. At issue is the fact that many African universities are handicapped with the lack of long-term funding for both infrastructure and other learning needs of their institutions. Thus, the donor country will always be in the driver's seat, setting the parameters of the aid package for the recipient country. That means that the implied win-win ethos of China's role in African universities is subject to

severe theoretical and empirical barriers when it comes to knowledge production and teaching about Africa (Fasan, 2021; Anshan, 2005).

Perhaps the above constraints and the need to balance the terms of engagement account for the ensuing floodgates of departments and centres in China devoted to studying Africa from an interdisciplinary perspective (Education, Geography, History, Law, and Political Studies) (Table 4.4). While notable, the opening of the Chinese Association of African Studies and the Chinese Society of African Historical Studies in 1979 and 1980 respectively, provide an important historical framework for studying Africa in China (Anshan, 2005). The expanding interest in African studies within China, and the relatively new status of this field compared to Western-centric studies, offers Chinese institutions and scholars with unique opportunities to know and understand Africa. Despite this progress in African studies in China, the field faces several challenges, including the centralised nature of the Chinese higher education system, which imposes a top-down approach to academic planning and a shortcoming for the long-term sustainability of research projects.

The centralised control of higher education in China significantly influences the direction and capacity for African studies. All academic institutions, from those directly managed by the central government like the Institute of West Asian and African Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), to prestigious universities such as Peking University and Fudan University, follow directives from their respective ministries. This centralised approach, strengthened under Xi Jinping, aims to consolidate African studies within a think-tank model, ensuring that the discipline aligns closely with the state's foreign policy objectives. Consequently, the capacity for African studies in China is deeply intertwined with governmental priorities, shaping the research focus and the very essence of the field in alignment with China's foreign policy strategies (Bolin et al., 2022). The argument is that both African and Chinese universities will experience difficulties when it comes to knowledge production on and about Africa.

The second analytical argument is the politics of knowledge production in an era of globalisation of HE relative to positionality and agency (van Hoeymissen, 2021; Zheng et al., 2021). Because of the historical origins of African universities, contemporary knowledge production in and about Africa, has always privileged Western knowledge (Ayandele & Oriola, 2023). As Afolabi (2020:95) rightfully states, any argument that colonisation “has no effect on the sociology of knowledge is to ignore the enforced knowledge acquisition mandated by the colonial authorities. The very basis of such ignorance, doubt and argument, especially by African academics, shows the success of the embedded liberal ideology and knowledge entrapment of colonialism.” Indeed, colonialism has created power imbalances which continue to inform the discourse on who produces what knowledge about Africa and the utilisation of such knowledge.

Thus, postcolonial African universities have been unable to decolonise the knowledge production systems on the continent, a failure that should not solely be attributed to the lack of infrastructure capacity in African universities, since lack of infrastructure cannot be equated to lack of mental capacity of the African academic (Fasan, 2021). The persistence of these challenges is also caused by the complexities of agency within knowledge production institutions. In the post-apartheid era, the Government of South Africa set out to improve equity in learning outcomes using technology in teaching and learning with connectivity speeds like European universities (Czerniewicz et al., 2014; Lwoga, 2012). Yet, students at the University of Cape Town were at the forefront of struggles to decolonise the curriculum (Lockett, 2016). Khalema et al. (2023), in great detail, used a decolonial framework to analyse the transformation of South African universities in a post-apartheid era and their findings offer a cautionary tale about the challenges of producing transformative universities even with clearly enunciated national policies on decolonialisation as a pathway to improve knowledge production and student learning. An impactful and decolonised production of knowledge needs to focus on rethinking how to translate historical processes into contemporary forms of teaching and learning. The overriding

lesson is that an “appropriate infrastructure, [and policies] though necessary, [are] not enough to deepen student learning” (Puplampu & Mugo, 2020:158).

Another crucial issue is recognising that China-focused centres in Africa are at the forefront of creating and integrating cultural knowledge about Africa-China relations into their academic programmes (Cheng, 2021). These Africa-China studies include courses and degree programmes that specifically address the historical, economic, political, and cultural dimensions of Africa-China interactions. For instance, the Centre for Asian Studies and the Department of Political Science at the University of Ghana offer modules on Africa-China relations within their international relations curriculum, providing students with a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics between Africa and China. Similar efforts are evident in the curriculum at the University of Johannesburg’s Centre for Africa-China Studies. These initiatives mark a promising beginning; if sustained and expanded, they have the potential to significantly enhance academic and cultural understanding, fostering more nuanced and informed perspectives on Africa-China relations.

Research produced by African universities on Africa-China relations can demonstrate agency and inform knowledge for public policy. Scholars from these institutions serve as valuable experts, providing insights that can influence government policies and public perceptions. The work of the Centre for Chinese Studies at the University of Dar es Salaam has influenced Tanzania’s foreign policy towards China, with research findings contributing to a more informed approach to diplomatic and economic engagements (Christopher, 2023). While there has been significant expansion in Africa-China knowledge exchange and collaborative partnerships, the landscape is complex and with challenges. For example, if Africa-based universities and research centres incorporate Chinese studies into their curricula, course offerings on Chinese language, culture and politics, these institutions can aim to present a comprehensive understanding of China. Such an approach can help to decolonise stereotypes

by equipping African students and scholars with the knowledge to engage with China on equal terms.

However, if these Africa-based programmes rely too heavily on Chinese perspectives and resources without a critical engagement, that may also inadvertently reinforce stereotypes of African dependency and lack of intellectual autonomy. While new research is being produced, it appears that some existing institutions lack active research or knowledge producing capabilities and just exist in name and on paper. Persistent obstacles such as funding limitations, the need for stronger connections between experts and government, and difficulties in integrating scholars with expertise in Africa–China relations or experience from Chinese universities and research centres into African academic institutions can hinder progress.

The third and final analytical theme is the implications of teaching and learning about Africa in an interdisciplinary framework in both Africa, China and beyond. On one hand, it is not surprising to note that studies about Africa and China have been approached from interdisciplinary perspectives. Thus, for example, a review of a course of the University of Johannesburg on The International Political Economy of Africa–China Relations, rightfully so, placed a significant focus on political and economic concerns. However, student learning, to be sustainable, must transcend disciplinary boundaries (Zezeza, 2006). That calls for new models of engagement between academics and learners in teaching and learning about Africa and China. One useful model will be to adopt a team-teaching approach in which different models of the course are presented by different experts, but in an integrated, collaborative, and coherent manner. The suggested model is a pragmatic approach, since it would be anchored by disruptive technology and digitalisation, issues that are central in the current educational landscape in several African universities.

On the other hand, a recurring question in Africa–China relations is which African actors are “spoken *of* or spoken *for*” (Mohan, 2013:1257, italics in original) and how that translates to the student experience (van Hoeymissen, 2021).

How can students as learners exercise agency in their learning experiences on Africa and China and not disengage from a pedagogical point of view when educators present knowledge that does not relate to their social context and experiences? The fundamental problem is the changing role of the state in funding African universities and the move by many universities to focus on knowledge areas that are amenable to quantitative performance indicators. The result is that knowledge areas that can contribute to a balanced understanding of the African condition, especially in the human and social sciences are the first to experience significant restructuring. However, the role of Confucius Institutes (Table 4.1) in several African universities is a reminder to have an equally robust cultural orientation in African universities. That is one way in which intercultural communication and understanding can be improved when it comes to learning about both Africa and China. The issue is not only what African universities must do, but the role of notable think-tanks in knowledge production about the African condition.

Some of the think-tanks shown in Table 4.3, as non-academic entities, in the powerful sense of the term, do have lines of support within Africa-China relations, and some experts in these think-tanks take on academic teaching in African universities. For example, the Africa-China Centre for Policy and Advisory (ACCPA) based in Accra has officers who were trained in universities in China. While that can be an asset, if ACCPA's research outputs focus on mainly the positive aspects of the Belt and Road Initiative in Africa, it can be seen as having an uncritical pro-China orientation (Frimpong & Tedeku, 2023). This highlights the need to critically assess the perspectives and agency of think-tanks, considering the potential influence of their funding sources on their knowledge claims (Mbadlanyana et al., 2011).

## **Policy Directions and Conclusion**

This chapter examined the complexities in knowledge production and teaching about Africa against the backdrop of globalisation of higher education and Africa-China relations. While the

relationship between Africa and China is often grounded on a win-win scenario, it is also obvious that discussions about knowledge production and teaching about Africa cannot be neutral and without implicit power dynamics. For African universities, one pathway at addressing the power relations might be to embark upon what Iheka (2023) characterises as new beginnings in the dissemination of knowledge and, by extension, learning about Africa. Such a beginning needs to factor in considerations such as ethics, responsibility, freedom of thought and using knowledge to empower learners and the community at large. Because higher education institutions can play a vital role in knowledge production and teaching about Africa, especially in a decolonised framework, there is need for a new form of relationship between the African state and African academics, especially those working on the continent. Even though the neoliberal globalisation touts the importance of a minimal state, the strides made by the Chinese state means a rethink in the relationship between the African state and African universities, particularly if the goal is to improve institutional capacity.

There are systemic issues in the higher education sector that influence the knowledge production capabilities of the faculty and researchers in African HE. One suggestion is strengthening institutional support in such a way that African governments can enhance funding and institutional support for research centres dedicated to both Africa-China studies and other area studies to ensure sustainability and independence. A renewed interest in developing and encouraging multidisciplinary approaches and programmes that integrate Political Science, Economics, Sociology, and language studies is needed to provide comprehensive insights into Africa-China relations. That means building research networks in a continental and regional framework to connect researchers, facilitate knowledge exchange, and disseminate research findings. Hence, the need to foster public-private partnerships between academic institutions and private sector entities interested in Africa-China relations to diversify funding sources should be part of the mix of options. Finally,

since larger changes from a geopolitical sphere are at stake, any attempt at addressing issues emanating from this study call for a “sustained and dynamic capital accumulation - development - in the developing world, ... that does not conform to neoliberal prescriptions [even though] ... any shifts away from neoliberalism are likely to have significant domestic and international consequences” (Kiely, 2007). Herein lies the importance of pursuing knowledge production based on a decolonial framework that also stresses the value of positionality and agency. It is through such a paradigm that knowledge production and teaching about Africa, in relation to China, can be better situated and actualised.

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