

## | The History of South Sudan's Chinese Future

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The creation of ties between South Sudan and China has been one of the more striking aspects of recent Sudanese politics and international relations. China's new Juba consulate, opened in September 2008, came months before February 2009 and the start of an extended series of celebrations commemorating the Golden Jubilee fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of official diplomatic China-Sudan relations.

Now, after South Sudan's independence in July 2011, swift diplomatic recognition by China and the formal opening of Juba's embassy in Beijing in April 2012, China-South Sudan relations are topical. Taking a step back from the heat of the immediate moment, however, this article considers the question of how should we think about the history of South Sudan's Chinese future. It does so via some broad thematic points, and locates these relations in historical time, both in terms of history as it has happened to date and is in the process of unfolding today.

### A New History

China's history of its Sudan future has only very recently come to encompass the *de facto* and then the *de jure* reality of two Sudans. When relations between Sudan and China changed from 'traditional' to 'strategic' after 1989, this reinforced the dominance of a northern-centric political geography of relations. This, of course, carried an official narrative and a sanctioned history of its own, which continued its own version of a history of Sudan's future China relations that had been forged in the nineteenth century. This is when the founding mythology of the colonial bridge linking Sudan and China began.

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## The Historical Mythology of China-Sudan Relations: Questioning Genesis

The first area concerns the unique historic links between Sudan and China, which have provided generations with a historical narrative on which to base relations. As seen, for example, during Premier Zhou Enlai's state visit to Khartoum in 1964, these have been fashioned into a colourful narrative distilled into the form of the perfect anti-hero, Chinese Gordon, who was viewed as a bridge linking Sudan and China.<sup>①</sup>

Gordon, who took part in the capture of Peking (Beijing) in 1860 and commanded the Chinese force that quashed the Taiping Rebellion (1863-1864), was shot to death in 1885 by 'a very tall black Sudanese'.<sup>②</sup> The meaning of 'Sudanese' from around the mid-nineteenth century was associated with the black peoples of Southern Sudan and the Nuba mountains, who were recruited into the Egyptian army then controlling Sudan or the slave armies of northern Sudanese traders.<sup>③</sup>

The upshot is that it is likely that the founding myth of Sudan-China relations is based upon the actions of a Southern Sudanese. For a history appropriated by successive ruling elites in Khartoum, and in view of Southern Sudan's comparative lack of a meaningful history of Chinese connections until recent years, this might provide a subversive twist and the basis of a new historical connection between South Sudan and China. In an important sense, however, the Mahdist rebellion united disparate groups of Sudan's peripheries into a common purpose. In this way, it makes little sense to reattribute a Southern identity to this founding episode. However, politics always appropriates and reinterprets history to its own ends.

Before and after the January 2011 referendum, efforts were made to strengthen the basis of China's relations with the GOSS. As well as the better covered

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<sup>①</sup> See Richard Hill, "The Gordon Literature," *The Durham University Journal*, Vol. 47, 1955, p. 97.

<sup>②</sup> J.A.R.Reid, "The death of Gordon," *Sudan Notes and Records* Vol. XX (1937), p. 173. Available in [www.sudanarchive.net](http://www.sudanarchive.net).

<sup>③</sup> Johnson, "The Death of Gordon," *op cit.*, footnote 51. p.309.

economic diplomacy or high-level political missions, the Chinese consulate and later its Embassy made active efforts to demonstrate a continuity of socio-cultural links between China and South Sudan. One dynamic appeared to be a desire to compensate for the recognised imbalance in China's relations with Sudan founded in Khartoum; a necessary adaptation and one that has paved the way for greater links between Juba and Beijing.

### **China and Southern Sudan's Economic Development**

The second area concerns the current significance that China is now being accorded to independent South Sudan's development prospects, which evokes a very different form of historical interest. One history of Sudan's China future from the nineteenth century foresaw a prominent Chinese role in economic development. In the late nineteenth century, various schemes were devised – and some implemented – predicated upon the superiority of Chinese labour in opening up Central Africa to more effective European resource exploitation.<sup>①</sup>

In certain respects, 'the Chinese' have long been associated with schemes of improvement, bound up in imaginaries of modernising projects using outside labour. Such projections were by no means confined to nineteenth century Egyptian-governed Sudan. Since 2005, and the entry of the first Chinese entrepreneurs who pioneered business ventures outside the oil sector in Southern Sudan after (and even before) the CPA, an independent Chinese role has been unfolding. Emin Pasha would be intrigued and, conceivably, feel partly vindicated, even if this is of a qualitatively different kind of engagement than he envisaged.

### **The Weight of the Past: a Mixed Legacy**

The mutual ignorance that formerly existed in China about South Sudan and vice versa was long conspicuous. Overcoming the history of the war years and the

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<sup>①</sup> He wrote in May 1881 "that if it is possible for Central Africa to be opened up, it can only be accomplished by means of the Chinese?" Schweinfürth, G. F. Ratzel, R.W. Felkin and G. Hartlaub eds., *Emin Pasha in Central Africa: being a collection of his letters and journals* (London: George Philip and Son, 1888), pp. 417, 419.

*Daniel Large*

legacy of China's role in Sudan's North-South and South-South civil wars after the 1989 NIF coup remains a challenge in relations going forward. Because of Beijing's strong and multifaceted support for Khartoum it is understandable that there were and remain strong feelings about China. However, China's adept diplomacy and the SPLM's savvy incorporation of China into its own political agenda during the CPA – using China not just in its domestic struggle with the NCP but also in its international diplomacy – demonstrated how at the elite level pragmatism founded in mutual interest trumped this history, opening a new historic phase.

South Sudan – China relations have been reset in political terms, though recent oil politics have not been easy or straightforward and the legacy of the past is mixed. The war years will continue to inform perceptions of China in South Sudan, especially for those in the oil producing areas. At the same time, China's history of support to Southern Sudan after 1972 and more recent attempts to be more cooperative with independent South Sudan through various gestures of assistance, and the processes to enhance mutual understanding point toward a better future.

### **Conclusion**

South Sudan's relations with China were born and baptised in political fire. That looks likely to continue, despite the September 2012 agreement on oil and security related matters between Sudan and South Sudan. The history of South Sudan's China future remains bound up in Sudan's relations with China and the continuing reality, albeit a contested one subject to ongoing violence, of two importantly inter-related and inter-dependent countries.

Today's expectations that China can deliver in South Sudan where others have failed hark back to the likes of Emin Pasha and the transformative visions centred on (controlled) Chinese agency. Given the enormity of South Sudan's development needs today, a hopeful but cautious realism should thus temper any notion of China's ingrained advantage or superiority; recent years have shown that China is just as subject to the constraints of operating in South Sudan as any other investor. The history of South Sudan's China future will likely become important if current trends continue, but this scenario depends upon this future history being made.