

# CHINA AND THE GLOBAL SOUTH:

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF  
KNOWLEDGE NETWORKS IN  
AFRICA, ASIA, AND LATIN AMERICA  
AND THE CARIBBEAN

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## **ABOUT THE CHINA AND GLOBAL SOUTH PROJECT**

The China and the Global South Project (CGS) aims to develop research capacity about China in the Global South and connect institutions and researchers producing knowledge on China in a global network.

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## INTRODUCTION

In December 2022, the China and the Global South Project (CGS) at the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) published [three scoping studies](#) on existing research capacity in contemporary China's engagement with Africa, Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). These baseline studies, undertaken with support from the Ford Foundation, surveyed relevant research produced by scholars and practitioners, and assessed the capacity for such knowledge production in the Global South, in China, and in the Global North. This note provides an analytic summary of the three reports so that readers can better understand the connections, including both similarities and differences, among them. It also aims to reflect on the general direction of where the study of the China and Global South is headed. It is not meant as a substitute for the three rich studies themselves.

## CONCEPTUAL CAVEATS

The Global South, often invoked in the context of development today, is a shorthand for developing nations in Africa, Asia, and LAC. National differences within this category are obvious. But as a meaningful political imaginary and analytic concept, it is rooted in shared visions of anticolonial solidarity dating back to the Cold War (Lee 2010; Mahler 2018; Stolte and Lewis 2022). From the first Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung, Indonesia in 1955 to the Tricontinental Conference in Havana, Cuba in 1966, newly independent countries across different regions sought collective solutions to their challenges in a polarized world. These intergovernmental convenings and other individual networks across national and regional boundaries signaled the rise of the Global South as a political force on the international stage.

China in our studies is often a shorthand for the People's Republic of China (PRC), founded in 1949 following the Communist victory in the Chinese Civil War (1946-9) and just a few years after Japan's surrender in World War II. The PRC participated in both the Bandung and Havana conferences and was a key advocate of global struggles against imperialism and colonialism. Unlike many other countries in the Global South, the pre-1949 China was never a full-fledged colony of one foreign power, and different Chinese governments upheld the country's sovereignty in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the early twenty-first century, the PRC's international standing and its relations with the Global South are, of course, markedly different from those in the 1950s and 1960s. In fact, the PRC's worldwide political and economic clout, particularly in the Global South, has generated anxieties about whether it would become a neo-colonial power. More than an expedient alignment of interests, China and the Global South as a contemporary topic still raises critical questions about how to put global knowledge production on a more equitable and sustainable footing beyond the dominance of the Global North (Bolin et al. 2022, 8). Researching this topic thus deepens decolonization as not just a political legacy from the mid-twentieth century, but also an intellectual potential of our time.

China as a shorthand, however, does not simply refer to the PRC government. The multiple Chinas the Global South encounters include Chinese officials and diplomats, employees of state-owned enterprises or private companies that invest overseas, tourists, and students, to give just a few examples. As all three studies demonstrate, there is not a single "China," and the interests of various Chinese actors do not always align. China and the Global South as a research topic thus needs to accommodate these diverse and sometimes competing perspectives.

## RESEARCH THEMES

Each of the three studies breaks down relevant literature into a few themes to better account for the development of China and the Global South as a research topic. While regional differences are expected, there are also common emphases. Generally speaking, broadly-defined economy, politics, and migration are the three common themes across all three regional surveys. They reflect the primary means through which China and the Global South have been engaging each other. China's impressive economic growth in the reform era necessitated its global search for energy sources, raw materials, and more recently, market access. The introduction of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in the past decade underscores infrastructural connectivity and deepens China's economic connections with the Global South. All three reports include numerous studies on the evolution of China's economic presence from the extractive sectors to more sophisticated and sustainable financing and infrastructure projects. They situate the Chinese case in comparative perspectives and challenge the stereotypes of China's global economic footprint. In regions with longstanding practices of (neo)colonial extraction of resources, such as Africa, LAC, and Southeast Asia, concerns over whether China will behave similarly are more pronounced. They reflect more of the lingering resentment toward such practices than a nuanced understanding of different Chinese actors from state-owned enterprises to private companies.

Although the PRC supported national liberation movements in different parts of the world during the Cold War, its steady political engagement with the Global South largely followed the country's economic takeoff. Traditionally a firm advocate of the principle of non-interference, China enjoys strong political relations with like-minded developing countries. On the other hand, it has recently become more proactive in joining multilateral frameworks in order to mediate conflicts. Our Africa work is best positioned to reveal such evolving Chinese practices as it is based on a preliminary study over a decade ago (Carayannis and Olin 2012). In conflict zones where the United Nations and the African Union play an important role, such as South Sudan, China has become more willing to contribute personnel and other resources to the extent that its adherence to non-interference is now under debate (Bolin et al., 15). In contrast, China's involvement in mediating conflicts in the Middle East, where the United States and Russia have long had vested interests, is more cautious (Zheng, Yang, and Elsherif 2022, 36). Besides participating in existing multilateral mechanisms, China has been forming new ones in the twenty-first century. From the Shanghai Cooperation Organization focusing on Central Asia and regular dialogue mechanisms with Southeast Asia, Africa, the Persian Gulf region, and LAC, to the Asian Infrastructure Development Bank as the multilateral financing arm of the BRI, China will continue to leave its own imprint on the international order. By and large an economic actor on the international stage through the 2000s, China has been an increasingly outspoken political actor in the past decade and is expected to continue such a trajectory under its current diplomatic vision.

This, however, should not obscure the agency of the Global South countries in charting their own terms of engagement with China, something all of our studies richly document. Such negotiations often take place under the context of China's competition with other powers, often the United States. The tenor of such competition varies from region to region and gives Global South countries a different set of possible choices. In Southeast Asia, the popular export-oriented development model and territorial disputes surrounding the South China Sea mean that China and the United States (and its allies such as Japan and to a lesser extent, Australia) are competing in both the economic and security realms. Countries in this region are thus inclined to hedge their ties to both superpowers to maximize their interests.

In West Asia and LAC where the United States has traditionally been the dominant power, China is making steady economic outreach without fundamentally challenging the US-led security order. The Chinese inroads in LAC are particularly noteworthy because of the region's relative proximity to the

United States. It is similar to the longstanding Russian influence in Central Asia. The Chinese presence in these regions has benefited from local concerns about the other powers, but it remains to be seen whether China turns out to be an enduring power that will transform the regional political economy or a temporary hedge. It is also important to point out that such presence does not necessarily benefit the regions equally. There is, for example, an active debate in LAC about the “winners” and “losers” of the “China effect” (Jauregui et al. 2022, 10-11).

In South Asia, India as the dominant power keeps a fraught relationship with Pakistan since the partition of British India in 1947, and with China since the border skirmishes in 1962. This has incentivized different axes of political and economic integration, tempered by the collective need of counter-terrorism in Afghanistan. Similarly, regional conflicts in Africa with global implications have necessitated big-power cooperation. But the United States has also been playing catch-up with China’s proactive longstanding partnership-building.

A different kind of competition the PRC faces, which also empowers select Global South countries, is Taiwan. No longer recognized diplomatically by most countries in the world, Taiwan nevertheless maintains extensive economic ties with particular regions of the Global South. This is not a purely contemporary phenomenon as Taiwan already organized its own development-focused outreach in select noncommunist countries in Southeast Asia and Africa during the Cold War (Lin 2019). At present, Taiwan still considers Southeast Asia a core region in its New Southbound Policy of economic integration (Zheng, Yang, and Elsherif, 12). Recently, the tense relations between China and India also give Taiwan an opening to offer much-needed Chinese language instruction in India (Zheng, Yang, and Elsherif, 47). Moving over to LAC, Taiwan still enjoys formal diplomatic relations with almost ten countries and extensive diasporic connections despite some high-profile recent switchovers to the PRC in Panama, El Salvador, and Nicaragua (Jauregui et al., 46). Given that the vast majority of countries worldwide that recognize Taiwan is concentrated in LAC, the region is expected to continue experiencing the impact of competition between the PRC and Taiwan.

In addition to studies on macro economy and politics, migration research provides more grounded perspectives through lived realities to understand the nuanced connections between China and the Global South. Existing research tends to focus on ethnic Chinese in Africa, Southeast Asia, and LAC because these immigration patterns date back to at least the imperial-capitalist world order in the nineteenth century and continue to the present. Multiethnic Muslim migrants from China to Central and West Asia and Chinese Muslim communities in Southeast Asia, topics that complicate the existing conceptual paradigms of the Chinese diaspora, are beginning to receive more attention. The presence of foreign sojourners in China from Africa and different parts of Asia also invites researchers to situate China in the two-way population movement. Whichever direction of such movement, migration as a research topic is often bound with layered identities not fully aligned with macroeconomic or political patterns. It is in these studies that readers are more likely to find the use of the ethnographic method in teasing out the complex meanings of China and the Global South.

Besides these three common themes across the regions, other smaller ones also emerge in our studies, though they are more region-specific. For example, concerns over the environmental impact of China’s global footprint are more pronounced in the mining and infrastructural projects in sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Amazon Basin. Not coincidentally, these places have our planet’s most concentrated and particularly vulnerable tropical ecologies, whose environmental degradation matters a lot not just to the local populations, but also to the global climate agenda. Particularly in LAC, such concerns are often fused with those over labor and indigenous rights, thanks to a strong presence of civil society groups invested in these issues. In contrast, in West and Central Asia where fossil fuel still reigns supreme in their trade relations with China, relevant discussions are much more muted, if at all.

Health is a related topic that is more prevalent in particular regions. This reflects the regional disparities in medical care capacities and China's strategic thinking in maximizing its health outreach (health diplomacy is a term Chinese officials and scholars refrain from using, while its usage is prominent among their Western counterparts). A growing body of research explores different activities and their consequences. In Africa, this is not a new topic as the PRC dispatched its health teams to the region dating back to the 1960s. The Ebola crisis in West Africa in 2014 and the Covid-19 pandemic heightened the importance of health in China-Africa relations, and motivated the Chinese side to provide traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) as a potential solution to the region's myriad of health challenges (Bolin et al., 32-6). China has also been engaging other countries in this field, particularly since the pandemic. They include Venezuela, populous regional powers like Brazil and Indonesia, and wealthy Gulf monarchies such as the UAE. Their vastly different socioeconomic status underscores China's diverse motivations for engaging in such health outreach (Jauregui et al., 31-33; Zheng, Yang, and Elsherif, 38).

China's media outreach is also an emerging research topic in Africa and parts of Asia. This reflects China's growing aspirations for a more prominent role in international discourses and these regions' perceived importance in such aspirations. The amount of resources the PRC government poured into supporting various state media's global presence is certainly impressive, yet the effect of such input is often questionable. It, therefore, reveals the discrepancy between China's political and economic might and its cultural appeal.

Africa	Asia (includes Southeast, South, Central, and West Asia)	LAC
Geo-Economics	Security & International Relations	(Geo)Economics
Peace & Security	Economy & Development	(Geo)politics & International Relations
Migration	Migration & Culture	Social, Environmental & Labor Impacts
Health & Environment		Migration, Identities & Culture
Media, Internet & Technology		

This table gives the readers a more direct sense of how the themes in different regional studies compare with each other. All of the themes are the top-level entries from the table of contents in each study in the order they appear. There are additional regional and sub-regional (in the case of Asia) subthemes that are not included here. The color-shaded themes generally represent the three common ones (economy, politics, and migration) except for minor wording differences. The unshaded themes are less common and more region-specific.



## RESEARCH CAPACITY

All three studies have detailed narratives of the respective capacities to study China and the Global South in the Global South, China, and the Global North. The mapping of relevant institutions and networks provides a direct visual presentation of some of the key points in the narratives (Bolin et al., 53; Zheng, Yang, and Elsherif, 55; Jauregui et al., 59). It should not be a surprise that the Global North, particularly the United States, still has a commanding advantage in producing and publishing the lion's share of the research on China's engagement with the Global South. Such advantage is not only in the content, namely the rich library and data collections, and in widely-cited research findings in various forms from articles to monographs that are mostly in English; it also comes in the form of dominant platforms, meaning the most prestigious conferences and academic and commercial publication outlets where researchers aspire to disseminate their ideas at different stages of development. While the dominance of Western and English-language publications is certainly not new in the social sciences, it is intellectually imperative to mitigate such dominance in studying China and the Global South.

Similar to the aforementioned Chinese media outreach in Africa and Asia, resource input is far from the guarantee of recognition and reputation. The growth of Chinese scholarship and publication venues and China-led institutional networks relevant to the Global South is nothing but breathtaking, particularly in major metropolitan centers such as Beijing and Shanghai. But so far, the readership of these publications and the programming of these networks outside China are unclear at best (Zheng, Yang, and Elsherif, 53-4). How to turn resources into sustainable capacity and impact thus remains a challenge for Chinese researchers and institutions.

Lacking a similar level of resources at their disposal, the Global South countries face an even steeper slope in building capacity. And their limited capacity is also uneven in different ways. Unsurprisingly, wealthier countries are generally better positioned to support relevant research and connect regional researchers. In Africa, it is in major urban centers in Johannesburg (South Africa), Accra (Ghana), Dakar (Senegal), and Nairobi (Kenya) where relevant researchers and institutions are concentrated (Bolin et al., 47). Across different parts of Asia, Singapore as a wealthy city-state is the unrivaled leader in its research institutions and networking, followed by Brunei, Malaysia, and Indonesia in maritime Southeast Asia, and Thailand on the mainland. Outside Southeast Asia, select institutions in India are starting to commit more resources for the study on India-China (Zheng, Yang, and Elsherif, 41-5, 46-7). In comparison, Central and West Asia are still lagging behind despite the oil wealth in the Persian Gulf region. The internal differences in LAC are no less stark, with Mexico in the north and Brazil, Argentina, and Chile in the south leading the pack (Jauregui et al., 48-51).

Another way to think about the uneven capacity is whether and how the development of China and the Global South as a research topic coincides with existing programming on China studies. With the exception of select Southeast Asian countries and India, China studies as a field is largely missing elsewhere. Moreover, the already limited supply of graduates who have the training, particularly in the Chinese language, is often siphoned away by the more lucrative private sector (Jauregui et al., 53). The institutional model in the Global North where decades of respective area studies programming (including China and different Global South regions) preceded the emergence of China and the Global South as a research topic is thus unrealistic for most of the Global South countries. China studies and China and the Global South are of course separate fields. While promoting the latter does not necessarily have to wait until the development of the former, a thorough understanding of China, including its history, languages, and cultures, is still necessary. How to leverage the limited capacity in China studies in building China and the Global South thus calls for more creative strategies in the Global South.

## NEW DIRECTIONS

It is impossible to predict how China and the Global South will grow as a vibrant topic of research. Given the persistent challenges in research on and in China (Luce/ACLS Advisory Group 2021), it can become an unexpected fulcrum in the field of China studies at a time when nuanced insights into this rising power are more important than ever.

A recent article on the state of the field of Global China calls for more fieldwork going forward, rather than just broad policy analysis (Lee 2022). This, however, raises the question of who has the means and freedom of travel to carry out such fieldwork. The ethnographic approach often requires longer stays and follow-up visits, and by extension more research support from funding agencies, home institutions, and on the ground. These are not usually easily available to scholars in the Global South.

Due to page limits, our scoping studies could not do full justice to all the innovative research on China and the Global South. The continental scheme in the studies is expedient, but we are fully aware that it is a construct often with Orientalist and colonial legacies (Lewis and Wigen 1997). A growing body of cross-regional studies has indeed appeared in just the past few years (Freymann 2020; Hillman 2020; Jepson, 2020; Alves and Lee 2022; Cheuk 2022; Kurlantzick 2022; Liu 2022; Murphy 2022; Repnikova 2022). There are also deepening interests in the historical and cultural (literary, visual, discursive, and ethnographical) analyses of the multilayered connections between China and the Global South (Umejei 2020; Gong 2022; Hsu 2022; Lu 2022; Suglo 2022a; Suglo 2022b; Rofel and Rojas 2023). International Communication Gazette (2023) published a recent special issue that examines Chinese media's going global ambitions in the past decade, particularly in Africa and LAC. Compared to the predominant focus on macro politics and economy, these methods are less common in the literature and often have more robust requirements about languages.

There are also ongoing projects supported by universities and think tanks that aim to examine China's presence in different parts of the Global South not bound by continental limits. They include [Mapping Global China](#) mainly funded by New York University, [People's Map of Global China](#) jointly supported by Australian National University, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, and Lund University (Sweden) among others, and the New York-based Asia Society Policy Institute's [Navigating the BRI Project](#). Various other projects that examine China in the world also have important components on China and the Global South, including the joint project of [Worldmaking and China](#) among several German universities, Max Planck Institute for the History of Science's [China in the Global System of Science](#), and the recently announced [Chinese Global Orders](#) project supported by the British Academy.

As in the scoping studies, our reference to existing publications and projects is not meant to be exhaustive. But it is clear that Global North-based scholars and institutions continue to dominate such new work. It is not that there is a lack of endogenous interest in the Global South about similar investigations. The [Centre for the Study of Developing Societies](#), founded in India in 1963, is celebrating its sixtieth anniversary. The Latin American Association of Asian and African Studies (*Asociación Latinoamericana de Estudios de Asia y África*, ALADAA), is an active scholarly association founded almost fifty years ago (Jauregui et al., 97). These institutions demonstrate such organic epistemic potential. On the other hand, Global North institutions such as the International Institute of Asian Studies in the Netherlands teamed up with several institutions in Africa in the 2010s to promote Africa-Asia as a new way of knowledge formation and helped launch the Association for Asian Studies in Africa. But sustaining the continuing momentum of such programming beyond the Dutch involvement has proven to be difficult (Bolin et al., 48; Zheng, Yang, and Elsherif, 59). More recently, Northwestern University in Qatar established the [Institute for Advanced Study in the Global South](#) with a focus on the Arab world. This represents another institutional model of the Global South satellite campus of a Global North university. How to harness these different intellectual and institutional resources for more equitable agenda-setting in studying China and the Global South is an ongoing goal.



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