Reviews

China returns to Africa
Chris Alden, Daniel Large and Ricardo Soares de Oliveira (eds), Hurst, 382 pages

THIS COLLECTION OF 19 ESAYS provides a much needed antidote to the hysteria that grips a great deal of writing about China’s re-engagement with the continent. Politics, economics, and the diplomacy of the Sino-African ruptures are of course covered, but there is a large forays into less covered territory – medicine, labour relations, and the diaspora. The breadth of subject matter is matched by the wide array of writers, including welcome addition of several essays from Chinese authors. We learn that France is mostly untroubled so far by China in Africa, as its focus on high-tech deep-water oil extraction, and service companies like logistics and telecoms, puts it out of direct competition. We discover the Portuguese ‘commonwealth’ has been commandeered by the Chinese as a smart way to reach Angola, Mozambique, and also Brazil.

But the problem about China’s rise is the sheer number of variables that can be endlessly argued over, as demonstrated in the very first article, which poses the question: China’s economic boom, what’s in it for Africa? Yes, the demand for commodities, one of the principal ways in which Africa has been commandeered by the Chinese as a smart way to reach Angola, Mozambique, and also Brazil.

In the end, one is left wondering whether China’s return to Africa has not held up a mirror to the West. The clamour and fear that characterises some responses in the Western media does not hide the fact that many are uncomfortable about their own countries’ engagement with Africa. Do France and Britain feel good about the actions of their oil companies? Is the European Union comfortable about the effects of the Common Agricultural Policy on the livelihoods of African farmers? Is the US relaxed with the amount spent on the war in Iraq (one day ($343m, according to US Department of Defence estimates) and the lack of (relatively cheap) helicopter support given to peacekeepers in Darfur? As China’s engagement with the continent deepens, and as China tries to manage the high expectations it has generated, little of this makes its way into the stories. Unpacking the effects of the Common Agricultural Policy on the livelihoods of African farmers? Is the US relaxed with the amount spent on the war in Iraq (one day ($343m, according to US Department of Defence estimates) and the lack of (relatively cheap) helicopter support given to peacekeepers in Darfur? As China’s engagement with the continent deepens, and as China tries to manage the high expectations it has generated, little of this makes its way into the stories.