

## Book Review

YUAN WANG, *THE RAILPOLITIK: LEADERSHIP AND AGENCY IN SINO-AFRICAN INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT*, OXFORD: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS (2023) pp. 288

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In “*The Railpolitik: Leadership and Agency in Sino-African Infrastructure Development*”, Yuan Wang tackles an intriguing and under-explored question: *why do Chinese-financed and constructed infrastructure projects in Africa, despite their similarities, show such varied effectiveness across different countries?* By comparing railway projects in Kenya, Ethiopia, and Angola, Wang seeks to uncover the underlying reasons for these disparities. She introduces the “*political championship*” theory (p. 8), emphasizing the critical role of African political leadership in determining state effectiveness. Wang’s analysis highlights the interaction between individual leadership and broader structural and institutional factors, offering a nuanced perspective on the outcomes of these projects. Through interviews and participatory observation, the book delves into the complexities of Sino-African relations and the challenges of infrastructure development.

To begin with, the book is meticulously structured, beginning with an introduction that contrasts the varied outcomes of the railway projects in the three countries. The *Kenyan Standard Gauge Railway* (“**SGR**”) is highlighted as largely successful, the *Ethiopian Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway* (“**ADR**”) experienced delays but is now functional, and the *Angolan Benguela Railway* (“**CFB**”) suffered from a lengthy construction delay and operational struggles. Wang attributes these differences to the level of political commitment and leadership in each country. She also presents alternative theories that attribute the variation to Chinese contractor capacity or African bureaucratic effectiveness. Wang elaborates on her theoretical framework and outlines her process tracing tests to evaluate the competing explanations in the initial chapter. She defines *state effectiveness* as the ability of states to achieve policy objectives, with railway effectiveness measured by timely completion and regular operations. Wang then critiques the Chinese agency argument, which focuses on the capacities of Chinese

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state-owned enterprises, and the bureaucratic capacity thesis, which emphasizes the effectiveness of African railway corporations. Her political championship theory suggests that African executive leadership, driven by electoral competition, plays a crucial role in overcoming obstacles to project delivery. Following chapters, from Chapter 2 to 4 present Wang's empirical analysis through detailed case studies. She employs fine-grained process tracing supported by extensive fieldwork and over 250 elite interviews. The analysis reveals that political championship was instrumental in the successful outcomes in Kenya and, initially, in Ethiopia, but was largely absent in Angola. Chapter 5 synthesizes the evidence, emphasizing the significant role of African agency in the context of China-Africa structural asymmetries. Wang illustrates how African presidents strategically utilized the Chinese railway projects for domestic political purposes, such as electoral campaigns and industrialization efforts.

A major strength of Wang's work is its focus on African domestic politics and the agency of political leaders in explaining the outcomes of Chinese infrastructure projects. Her *political championship* theory challenges the conventional emphasis on institutional and structural factors, bringing out the importance of leadership in driving infrastructure effectiveness. This perspective aligns with theories on "big man" politics in Africa, where leaders' political survival strategies can coincide with public goods delivery.

Empirically, Wang's comparative analysis of the three railway projects is unparalleled in depth and quality of evidence. Her multi-year fieldwork and extensive interviews provide rich and authentic process tracing. The detailed documentation of railway project processes, high-level politics, and participatory observations with railway workers supports her theoretical claims. Shadow cases on industrial parks and housing projects further affirm Wang's thesis. Wang also notes that leadership authority often extends beyond constitutional frameworks, suggesting a complex and multifaceted relationship between political leaders and technocratic institutions. Wang's findings have significant policy implications. While concerns about neo-colonial relationships in external bilateral infrastructure financing persist, Wang finds that African agency often "*extraverts*" projects to fulfill domestic ambitions. Her research highlights African state heterogeneity and suggests that constructive leveraging of policy space is crucial, while respecting local ownership.

While the book offers valuable insights and makes significant contributions to the understanding of Sino-African relations, there are areas where it could benefit from further exploration and critique. One critique is the limited geographical scope of Wang's analysis. The focus on three case studies – SGR, ADR, CFB provides depth but may not capture the full diversity of experiences across the continent. Expanding the analysis to include more countries could offer a broader perspective on the varying dynamics of Sino-African infrastructure projects. This would enhance the book's applicability and allow for a more comprehensive understanding of how different political, economic, and social contexts influence project outcomes. Also, while Wang's focus on political leadership is a strength, the book could delve deeper into the gender dynamics and diversity within leadership and bureaucratic structures. Exploring how gender and other forms of diversity impact the

leadership styles and effectiveness in these projects would add another layer of complexity to the analysis. This could also address potential biases and offer a more inclusive view of the factors that contribute to successful infrastructure development.

The concept of “*political championship*” is presented as a key driver of project success, yet Wang’s thesis appears almost universally applicable across the cases studied, with few identified conditions under which it might not apply. Further research could explore the limits of this theory, such as its relevance in long-term investments not tied to regime survival or in highly diversified neo-patrimonial regimes less susceptible to political shocks. Unpacking the interactions between political leadership and institutions like *pockets of effectiveness* (“**PoEs**”) would also be valuable. Wang notes that leadership authority often extends beyond constitutional frameworks, suggesting a complex and multifaceted relationship between political leaders and technocratic institutions.

Another area for further exploration is the financial aspects of these railway projects. While Wang touches on the role of Chinese *state-owned enterprises* (“**SOEs**”) and the concept of “*debt diplomacy*,” a deeper analysis of project financing and the implications of Chinese loans would be beneficial. Understanding the financial underpinnings of these projects, including the terms of loans and the long-term economic impacts on African countries, is crucial for a comprehensive evaluation of their effectiveness and sustainability. Wang’s analysis could also benefit from a more thorough assessment of the environmental and social impacts of railway construction. While the book focuses on the political and bureaucratic dimensions, considering the ecological sustainability and community well-being is essential. Balancing economic development with environmental protection is a critical challenge, and a deeper exploration of how these projects address—or fail to address—environmental and social concerns would provide a more holistic understanding of their impact. In policy terms, while Wang’s findings emphasize the importance of strong political leadership, they also raise concerns about the potential for projects to be leveraged for patrimonial purposes or electoral goals. This shows the need for policy conditionalities around transparency and good governance. Wang’s research highlights African state heterogeneity and suggests that constructive leveraging of policy space is crucial, while respecting local ownership. However, the book could offer more concrete policy recommendations for African governments and Chinese investors to optimize leadership agency and bureaucratic effectiveness.

To conclude, “*The Railpolitik*” is definitely a thought-provoking work that bridges political science, development studies, and infrastructure economics. Wang’s detailed analysis sheds light on the complexities of railway development in Africa, making it essential reading for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners alike. Her focus on African political leadership as a key driver of project outcomes challenges existing narratives and provides valuable insights into the dynamics of Sino-African infrastructure development. While Yuan Wang’s “*The Railpolitik: Leadership and Agency in Sino-African Infrastructure Development*” is undoubtedly informative, offering valuable insights into the dynamics of Chinese-sponsored railway projects in Africa, it occasionally feels repetitive and could benefit from a more engaging narrative.