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China in Africa: Shaping Economic Relations Through Subnational Actors

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China's engagement with Africa is often viewed through the lens of state-driven initiatives. This policy brief deconstructs China as a unitary actor by examining the role of Chinese subnational actors, particularly provincial and local governments, in shaping China's economic engagement with Africa. Using Zhejiang Province as a case study, the policy brief explores the motivations behind Zhejiang's efforts to foster economic ties and investment in Africa. It highlights the specific tactics employed by the province, including mobilizing city-level governments and entities to facilitate and advance its economic relations with Africa. It demonstrates how Zhejiang's unique economic structure and position within the Chinese economy shape its distinct interests and approaches in engaging with African partners. These subnational dynamics are crucial for policymakers as they provide a more comprehensive picture of China's multifaceted foreign engagement efforts.

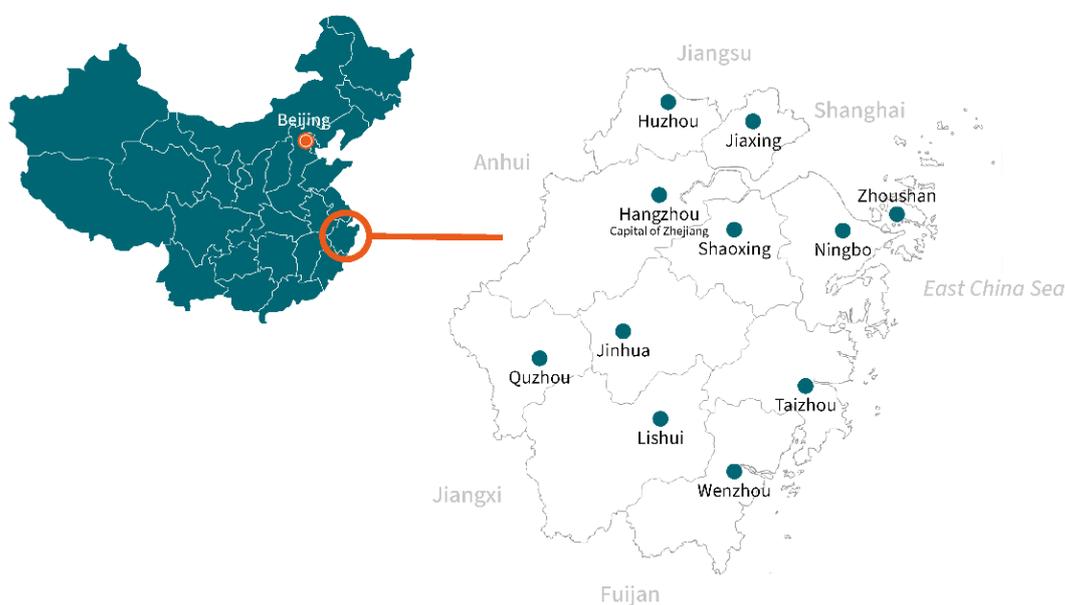
Amid the recent trend toward greater centralization under Xi Jinping's leadership, many of the media and policy debates on China's global engagement have largely focused on the various global initiatives of the central government, particularly those spearheaded by Xi (e.g. the Belt and Road Initiative and the Global Development Initiative). However, the complex governance structure in China reflects a dynamic interplay between centralized control and decentralized improvisation, where both national and subnational actors influence decision-making and implementation. While the central government in Beijing sets strategic directions and overarching goals aligned with state policies and international ambitions, subnational actors—such as provincial governments, local city administrations, and various regional entities like companies, research institutes, and universities—also play a crucial role in shaping China's international relations. These subnational actors are also significant in China's economic engagement with Africa, especially in terms of facilitating, endorsing, and supporting economic cooperation with Africa.

Drawing on analysis of policy documents, media reports, and 28 interviews (both formal and informal) conducted with Chinese government officials and scholars, Africa-based Chinese entrepreneurs, and African diplomats based in Beijing, this policy brief investigates the specific interests and tactics that Chinese subnational actors, especially provincial and municipal governments, employ to foster economic relations with Africa. It also examines

how these approaches reflect broader challenges and opportunities in China’s decentralized economic cooperation with Africa. Using Zhejiang province—a coastal province in Eastern China—and its economic cooperation with Africa as a case study, the analysis illuminates the dynamics of China’s subnational economic engagement.

Zhejiang was selected due to its proactive role in deepening economic ties with Africa. The eastern coastal province has a population size of over 65 million, with Hangzhou as capital and key economic hub. The province is known as the “backbone of China” and it is one of the major driving forces in the Chinese economy, especially in sectors such as manufacturing and e-commerce. It is also regarded within Chinese policy circles as a model for shaping and driving subnational economic interactions with the continent, known as *Zhejiang moshi* (Zhejiang model, 浙江模式).¹

China’s Zhejiang Province



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Figure 1: Map of China’s Zhejiang Province and its key cities.

The case of Zhejiang province highlights how its position within the Chinese economy and unique economic structure, driven by a strong private sector and export-oriented industries, shape its distinct approaches in engaging with African actors. As demonstrated below, Zhejiang prioritizes trade partnerships and investment and employs targeted policies to foster business partnerships, attract investment, and position its cities as key hubs for China–Africa economic exchanges. This tailored approach, adopted by both provincial and city governments, aligns with national directives but also reflects Chinese subnational actor’s capacity to innovate and adapt.

¹ Rongrong, Cai, “2023中国(浙江)中非经贸论坛将于11月8日在金华举行 [2023 China (Zhejiang) China-Africa Economic and Trade Forum to be held in Jinhua on November 8]”, *Belt and Road Portal*, 31 October 2023, accessed March 29, 2025, <https://www.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/p/021JI2TL.html>.

The Role of Chinese Subnational Actors in China-Africa Relations: An Overview

Within the domestic sphere, China has implemented a unique support mechanism known as “*duikou zhiyuan*” (对口支援), or “twinning assistance”, in which more economically developed provinces are paired with less developed counterparts to foster growth and development.² In parallel, China has extended this twinning concept to its aid implementation, also known as the “One Province, One Country” model, which was first applied to medical and agricultural aid. Since 1963, each province in China has been twinned with one or more African countries, dispatching medical teams to provide healthcare services and technical assistance. Using a similar approach, China has established 24 agro-technology demonstration centres (ATDCs) across Africa since 2006,³ where provincial agricultural experts work with African counterparts to boost agricultural productivity and facilitate technology transfer. This province–country twinning assistance has not only aided the demographic spread of Chinese migrants in Africa, but also influenced the structure of Chinese enterprises operating there, enabling companies from certain provinces to transform aid relationships into commercial opportunities.⁴ In Uganda, for instance, companies from Sichuan province have leveraged these twinning arrangements to convert developmental aid into commercial ventures.⁵

The existing body of literature on the role of subnational actors in China–Africa relations has predominantly been explored through the frameworks of multi-layered diplomacy⁶ or para-diplomacy,⁷ or by viewing these actors as agents/actors of China’s international development or foreign policy.⁸ Discussion has often been limited to aid and development cooperation in certain sectors, such as health and agricultural cooperation.⁹ Less attention has been directed towards understanding the involvement of subnational actors in promoting economic relations with Africa. Despite this gap, it is evident that the outward expansion of Chinese enterprises, including their ventures into Africa, is significantly influenced by the initiatives of China’s provincial governments, with their unique provincial commercial objectives, business cultures, and political directives.¹⁰ This dimension underscores the need for a more nuanced analysis that recognizes the critical role played by China’s subnational actors in driving the country’s global economic engagements, especially in the African context.

Following the elevation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to a national priority by Xi Jinping, provincial administrations have crafted localized strategies to align with this agenda. Reports indicate that two-thirds of Chinese provinces have cited the initiative as a

² Xuefei Shi and Paul Hoebink, “From Chengdu to Kampala: The Role of Subnational Actors in China’s Foreign Aid,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 29, no. 121 (2020): 125–140.

³ Alexander Ayertey Odonkor, “FOCAC: A Pillar of Agricultural Development in Africa,” *CGTN*, 05 September 2024, accessed March 28, 2025, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2024-09-05/FOCAC-A-pillar-of-agricultural-development-in-Africa-1wCBzHS5Jhm/p.html>.

⁴ Hangwei Li and Xuefei Shi, “Home Away from Home: The Social and Political Roles of Contemporary Chinese Associations in Zambia,” *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 48, no. 2 (2019): 148–170.

⁵ Shi and Hoebink, 2020.

⁶ Junbo, Jian, Zhimin, Chen, and Diyu, Chen, “The Provinces and China’s Multi-layered Diplomacy: The Cases of GMS and Africa,” *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 5, no. 4 (2010): 331–356.

⁷ Gordon C. Shen and Victoria Y. Fan, “China’s Provincial Diplomacy to Africa: Applications to Health Cooperation,” *Contemporary Politics* 20, no. 2 (2014): 182–208.

⁸ See for instance: Steve Hess and Richard Aidoo, “Charting the Impact of Subnational Actors in China’s Foreign Relations,” *Asian Survey* 56, no. 2 (2016): 301–324; Zhimin, Chen, and Junbo, Jian, *Chinese Provinces as Foreign Policy Actors in Africa* (SALIA Occasional Paper 22, 2009).

⁹ See for instance, Shi and Hoebink; Shen, Gordon and Fan, 2014.

¹⁰ Jing Gu, Chuanhong Zhang, Alcides Vaz, and Langton Mukwereza. “Chinese State Capitalism? Rethinking the Role of the State and Business in Chinese Development Cooperation in Africa,” *World Development* 81 (2016): 24–34.

development priority, incorporating it into their annual work plans and pinpointing specific investment projects in support of the initiative. At the subnational level, a variety of actors, ranging from provincial and municipal governments to non-state organizations—are mobilizing efforts to strengthen China–Africa trade and economic collaboration. These efforts are facilitated by the loose policy architecture of the BRI, which allows subnational entities to pursue their own objectives within the broader national strategy.¹¹

For instance, several Chinese provinces are proactively developing provincial platforms that leverage their unique industrial strengths and regional characters. A variety of provincial-level forums and initiatives have been launched, serving as long-term mechanisms for bolstering ties with African partners. For instance, in 2022, the Departments of Commerce of six provinces—Shanxi, Anhui, Jiangxi, Henan, Hubei, and Hunan, signed an agreement among the Commercial Departments of the Six Central Provinces on Joint Promotion of Economic and Trade Cooperation with Africa, aiming to make collective efforts in promoting the implementation of the China–Africa Cooperation “Nine Projects” Initiative.¹² Additionally, provinces with a robust private sector economy, such as Guangdong, Zhejiang, Jiangsu, and Shandong, are at the forefront of pioneering local-level engagements with Africa.

Moreover, the overlap in selecting “key collaborative African countries” by numerous Chinese provinces further demonstrates the competition between different Chinese provinces. For instance, as part of the “Going Out” strategy and the “Fujian Provincial Government’s Suggestions on Carrying out Going Out Openness Strategy”,¹³ Fujian Province identified South Africa and Nigeria as preferred destinations for overseas investment as early as 2003, focusing on resource development and labour-intensive industries.¹⁴ Concurrently, Zhejiang and Shanghai have also pinpointed South Africa as a crucial investment destination. Shanghai, in particular, has invested capital in local companies and established a permanent office to support Shanghai-based companies’ operations in South Africa.¹⁵

The fragmented nature of authoritarianism is not only illustrated by the competition among provinces, but also by the misalignment between the central government and subnational entities. An example is certain Chinese provincial entities in Africa failing to fulfil social responsibilities—not necessarily out of deliberate intent, but due to their inability to effectively regulate the actions of overseas public and private actors, which may eventually cause problems for Beijing. For instance, between 2008 to 2012, officials from Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous’ Shanglin County supported the involvement of around 15,000 Chinese nationals in illegal gold mining activities. The 2013 crackdown on illegal Chinese gold miners in Ghana (also known as the Galamsey Crisis) not only damaged Sino-Ghanaian

¹¹ Lee Jones and Jinghan Zeng, “Understanding China’s ‘Belt and Road Initiative’: Beyond ‘Grand Strategy’ to a State Transformation Analysis,” in *Rising Powers and State Transformation*, ed. Shahar Hameiri, Lee Jones, John Heathershaw (Routledge, 2020) pp. 19-43.

¹² Zhongguowang, “Foreign Diplomats from 15 African Countries Meet in Hunan, China to Explore In-depth China-Africa Economic and Trade Cooperation,” 3 August 2022, accessed March 29, 2025, http://szjj.china.com.cn/en/2022-08/03/content_42053833.html

¹³ The Fujian Provincial People’s Government, “福建省人民政府关于贯彻‘走出去’开放战略的实施意见” [Fujian Provincial People’s Government’s Suggestions on Carrying out ‘Going Out’ Openness Strategy], 2001, accessed March 28, 2025, <http://zfgb.fujian.gov.cn/1255>.

¹⁴ Chen and Jian, 2009, p.12.

¹⁵ Purnendra Jain, “Asian Subnational Governments in Foreign Affairs,” in *The Sage Handbook of Asian Foreign Policy* (Sage, 2019) p. 324.

relations but also seriously damaged China's image on the continent.¹⁶ Thus, decentralization has effectively internationalized provincial interests, occasionally at the expense of China's overarching state interests.¹⁷

Chinese subnational actors have been adopting diverse strategies to engage with Africa. For instance, economically advanced coastal provinces (e.g. Shanghai, Zhejiang, and Guangdong) are expected to make high-calibre contributions to educational, medical, and agricultural aid.¹⁸ Beyond the national aid budget, these subnational entities have the capacity to mobilize additional financial resources at the local level and demonstrate a greater willingness to allocate funds to non-productive, conspicuous aid programmes, particularly to the hosting of training programmes. In contrast, less wealthy provinces (e.g. Hubei, Sichuan, Henan) tend to view foreign aid primarily as a means to secure future business and investment opportunities. However, the evolving role of Chinese subnational actors in promoting economic relations with Africa remains underexplored in much of the existing research. More recent studies on the landlocked Hunan province, reveal a shift in subnational focus toward promoting deeper economic ties. In contrast to Zhejiang's approach, Hunan Province's strategic engagement with Africa lies in leveraging its strengths in agriculture, construction machinery, mining, and metallurgy to deepen ties with Africa while showcasing its domestic poverty eradication expertise.¹⁹

Unpacking Zhejiang's Economic Engagement with Africa

Zhejiang's engagement with Africa began with a focus on humanitarian aid and technical training. Since 1968, Zhejiang has continuously dispatched medical teams to Mali, the Central African Republic, and Namibia, sending more than 1,200 technical experts over a period of 56 years by 2024.²⁰ Following the Chinese economic reform in 1979, Zhejiang experienced significant growth in its private sector. In 1998, the province was selected as a pilot province for encouraging private enterprises to expand their investments overseas.²¹ Since then, private enterprises gradually became the dominant force in Zhejiang's overseas investment. The Chinese government's "Going Out" strategy, officially launched in the annual report to the National People's Congress in 2001²² to boost Chinese investments abroad, further influenced Zhejiang's international economic activities. Zhejiang provincial government committed to rewarding companies that increased their trade activities with Africa and to provide financial assistance for local businesses participating in overseas

¹⁶ For instance, see Jonathan Kaiman and Afua Hirsch, "Ghana Arrests 168 Chinese Nationals in Illegal Mining Crackdown", *Guardian*, June 6, 2013.

¹⁷ Charlotte Lenz, *China's Province as Global Actors: Evidence from China-Africa Relations* (LSE Ideas, China Foresight, 2023).

¹⁸ Xuefei Shi, "China's Foreign Aid in East Africa: Decentralising Cooperation" (Doctoral dissertation, Radboud University, Nijmegen, 2019).

¹⁹ Lauren Johnston, *The Hunan Model: China's Zone for the China-Africa Future* (South African Institute of International Relations, 2023).

²⁰ Le, Lu and Zhezhe, Bai, "中国这场高规格的主场外交，为何专为浙江办吹风会" [Why did China hold a high-level diplomatic briefing specifically for Zhejiang?], *Tengxun* (September 4, 2024), accessed March 28, 2025, <https://news.qq.com/rain/a/20240904A06S0H00>.

²¹ The Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China, "浙江省政府召开加快实施"走出去"战略工作会议" [The Zhejiang Provincial Government held a work conference to accelerate the implementation of the "going out" strategy], December 9, 2011, https://www.gov.cn/gzdt/2011-12/09/content_2015828.htm.

²² The National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China, Report on the Outline of the Tenth Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development (2001), March 3, 2010, http://www.npc.gov.cn/zgrdw/englishnpc/Special_11_5/2010-03/03/content_1690620.htm.

trade fairs and, consequently, Zhejiang's private sector plays a "vanguard" role in investing in Africa.²³

Motivations for Driving Economic Engagement with Africa

Given Zhejiang's heavy reliance on international markets, particularly well-established ones, Zhejiang's economy has been vulnerable to global economic disruptions, such as the financial crisis of 2008 and the Covid-19 pandemic. One of its key motivations for strengthening economic engagement with Africa is, therefore, to diversify partners in order to mitigate its risks and dependence associated with its traditional focus on established markets.²⁴

Another key motivation is to address its overcapacity issue. The province is expected to adhere to capacity reduction as part of China's national mandates and adopt cleaner production technologies. Zhejiang's industrial sectors, such as non-ferrous metal smelting and non-metallic mineral product manufacturing (e.g. cement, glass, and ceramics) have been facing significant excess production capacity. African markets, which have substantial infrastructure gaps, offer a "spatial fix"²⁵ for the province to mitigate its overcapacity through exporting construction materials, machinery, industrial equipment, and manufactured goods. This explains why investments in Africa from Zhejiang province have focused heavily on sectors such as non-ferrous metal smelting, and non-metallic mineral product manufacturing.²⁶

The third motivation is to sustain the growth of its digital economy. The digital economy plays a key role in the province's economic structure. In 2021, the added value of Zhejiang's digital economy reached CNY 3.57 trillion (approximately USD 533.52 billion), accounting for 48.6% of the province's GDP.²⁷ However, China's broader economic challenges, particularly its sluggish domestic consumption, have influenced consumer behaviour, leading to a more cautious approach to spending—especially among younger demographics. Expanding into African markets through cross-border e-commerce allows Zhejiang enterprises to counteract slowing domestic consumption and declining domestic demand.

Zhejiang's Approaches to Economic Engagement with Africa

Zhejiang's approaches to economic engagement with Africa are characterized by strong provincial-level support, a decentralized approach involving numerous non-state actors, and support for trade facilitation and digital cooperation.

1. Strong Provincial-Level Support

Support from the provincial government is a key driver of Zhejiang's economic cooperation with Africa. In 2019, the Department of Commerce of Zhejiang Province issued the Action Plan for Accelerating Economic and Trade Cooperation with Africa (2019–2022), which is also the first provincial government plan that focuses on economic and trade cooperation

²³ Xiaofang Shen, *Private Chinese Investment in Africa: Myths and Realities* (World Bank Policy Research Working Paper 6311, World Bank, 2013), p.8.

²⁴ Interview with an official from Zhejiang Province, Hangzhou, September 2018.

²⁵ Pádraig Carmody, Ian Taylor, and Tim Zajontz, "China's Spatial Fix and 'Debt Diplomacy' in Africa: Constraining Belt or Road to Economic Transformation?" *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 56, no. 1 (2022): 57-77.

²⁶ Multiple interviews with officials and scholars from Zhejiang Province, August 2018.

²⁷ Zhejiang Government, "浙江首次编制发布《浙江省数字经济发展白皮书》 [Zhejiang has compiled and released the White Paper on the Development of Digital Economy in Zhejiang Province for the first time]", August 5, 2022, https://www.zjwx.gov.cn/art/2022/8/5/art_1694818_58871741.html

with Africa.²⁸ The plan encourages more Zhejiang entrepreneurs to “go out” to Africa and collaborate with both African governments and market participants. The plan sets a target that by the end of 2022, Zhejiang Province aims to achieve a total trade volume with Africa of \$40 billion, which would account for more than 20% of China’s trade with Africa.²⁹ Concurrently, significant support will be provided to Zhejiang enterprises, particularly private enterprises, to explore the African market. Additionally, the province has also established and hosted key platforms for dialogue and collaboration, such as the China (Zhejiang) Forum on China-Africa Economic and Trade Relations and the China-Africa Cultural Cooperation and Exchange Month.

2. A Decentralized Approach Involving Numerous Non-State Actors

Zhejiang adopts a decentralized approach to its engagement with Africa, having established 31 sister-city relationships with African counterparts. These partnerships extend beyond the provincial level to include also municipal and district levels.³⁰ To drive its economic relations with Africa, Zhejiang province has mobilized a diverse range of non-state actors, leveraging a network that includes private companies, overseas migrant entrepreneurs, business chambers and associations, as well as universities and research institutions.³¹ By mobilizing these varied actors, Zhejiang has cultivated a dynamic ecosystem that integrates entrepreneurial initiatives with academic and institutional support, improving its capacity to engage with African markets more effectively. More than 20 universities in Zhejiang have established partnerships with African institutions.³² Zhejiang entrepreneurs based in Africa actively engage with Zhejiang officials and other peers, serving as a focal point, and facilitating and increasing the frequency of connections (*guanxi*) between Zhejiang province and African countries. Their efforts contributed to a diversified network of connections that bolster trade and investment, and people-to-people exchanges.

3. Strong Support on Trade Facilitation and Digital Cooperation with Africa

To facilitate SMEs’ business with African companies, the provincial government has provided targeted support to SMEs by improving physical trade logistics and enhancing bilateral trade efficiency. In African countries that are major traders, such as South Africa, Zhejiang province has established Zhejiang Commercial Representative Office.³³ The provincial government has also organized investment and trade cooperation promotion conferences, typically spearheaded by the province’s Commerce Department and supported by Chinese embassies.

Zhejiang has also launched initiatives such as China’s first China–Africa Trade Index, and established the inaugural China–Africa cross-border renminbi settlement centre, designed to enhance trade service accessibility and streamline financial transactions. Moreover, the Zhejiang–Africa Service Center (ZASC), established by the China–Africa Business Council, the

²⁸ Ministry of Commerce, People’s Republic of China, “浙非经贸合作行动计划发布 力争对非贸易破400亿美元” [Zhejiang-Africa economic and trade cooperation action plan released and strive to break 40 billion U.S. dollars of trade with Africa], March 4, 2019, <http://tradeinservices.mofcom.gov.cn/article/news/gnxw/201903/78799.html>

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Jie Shan, “Zhejiang’s cooperation with African countries embodies win-win path of China-Africa relations: Conference”, *Global Times*, 2024.

³¹ China-Africa Business Council, *China-Africa Cooperation from a Supply Chain Perspective: Chinese Investment in Africa 2022*, 2022, p.61.

³² Shan, 2024.

³³ Department of Commerce of Zhejiang Province, “Overview of Zhejiang Province’s Overseas Commercial Representative Offices”, June 6, 2024, accessed March 28, 2025, https://zcom.zj.gov.cn/art/2024/6/6/art_1229712085_58938611.html

Zhejiang Federation of Industry and Commerce, the Zhejiang Provincial Department of Commerce, Zhejiang Normal University, and the Hangzhou Qiantang New District Management Committee, serves as a platform to assist Chinese enterprises in entering African markets and to strengthen trade relations.

Furthermore, Zhejiang's role as home to China's e-commerce giant Alibaba has further advanced its digital cooperation with Africa. Alibaba and Alibaba Cloud—the digital technology and intelligence backbone of the Alibaba Group, have actively engaged with African companies through various partnerships and initiatives, including business-focused and corporate social responsibility programmes aimed at talent development. The provincial government of Zhejiang has played a supportive role in facilitating Alibaba's expansion into Africa, particularly in the areas of digital commerce and e-commerce, fostering the integration of African enterprises into the Chinese digital economy. Additionally, Zhejiang has launched a variety of initiatives to promote digital trade cooperation with Africa, especially through cross-border e-commerce, livestreaming platforms, and other digital trade mechanisms to facilitate the entry of African products into the Chinese market.

The Role of Jinhua

Jinhua, the prefecture-level city administers nine county-level divisions, including two districts, three counties, and four county-level cities (Yiwu, Dongyang, Lanxi, and Yongkang). Jinhua's significance in China–Africa relations is underpinned by its historical evolution into an international trade hub, it is also Zhejiang's premier exporter to Africa. Since the early 2000s, Jinhua (led by Yiwu), has cultivated a globally connected small commodities industry. This development has not only facilitated economic clustering in Jinhua but also established the city as an integral node in China's export-oriented economy. Building on these foundations, Jinhua has increasingly extended its economic reach to Africa, and contributes over 8 per cent to China's total exports to Africa, ranking it as the top prefecture-level city in national export figures.³⁴ Over the past five years, Jinhua has attracted more than 5,000 African merchants who have established enterprises within the city, while approximately 30,000 Jinhua entrepreneurs have been actively conducting business in Africa for several years.³⁵ Jinhua's importance is further highlighted through its initiation of numerous conferences, forums, exhibitions, and other types of events, which often pave the way for the signing of Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) and foster investment and cooperation opportunities.

In addition to institutional networks, Jinhua also leverages individual networks in its engagement with African countries, especially through entrepreneurs from Jinhua who are doing business in Africa. For instance, the Sino-Tan Industrial Park,³⁶ the largest of its kind in Tanzania, was established by a Jinhua entrepreneur, who has been active in fostering connections between Jinhua and Tanzania, facilitating high-level engagements among officials, business leaders, scholars, and researchers from both regions. This entrepreneur facilitated a delegation led by the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade Zhejiang Provincial Committee and the Jinhua Municipal People's Government, which

³⁴ "Jinhua leads China's exports to Africa", *Jinhua Today*, November 12, 2024, accessed March 28, 2025, http://www.ezhejiang.gov.cn/jinhua/2024-11/12/c_1044332.htm

³⁵ "2023 China (Zhejiang) Forum on China-Africa Economic and Trade Relations to be held in E. China's Jinhua", *Belt and Road Portal*, 2023.

³⁶ Sino-Tan Industrial Park, <http://www.stindustrialpark.com/en>; <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/p/08GJ51HB.html>

included more than 100 economic and trade representatives, to explore investment opportunities and strengthen economic ties with Tanzania.³⁷ The facilitation of these engagements and the cultivation of networks with influential migrant entrepreneurs are often orchestrated by various associations at both the municipal and provincial levels. These include, but are not limited to, the United Front Work Department of Jinhua City, the Federation of Overseas Chinese of Jinhua City, and the Zhejiang Provincial Federation of Overseas Chinese.

Discussion and Conclusion

This policy brief deconstructs China as a unitary actor and illuminates that the role of provincial and local governments should not be viewed as autonomous entities acting in isolation but rather as integral parts of a multi-layered political architecture that encompasses local, national, and international spheres. The central government's prominence and authoritarian nature have often overshadowed the role of subnational actors in foreign economic engagements, yet, as demonstrated, the role of China's subnational actors in engaging with Africa has expanded and evolved beyond their traditional roles, such as implementing Chinese aid programmes, and actively promoting and strengthening economic relations with the continent.

Moreover, cities like Jinhua also further illustrate the important role of subnational actors in fostering institutional, academic, and individual networks between Zhejiang and Africa. Through a variety of events and activities, these cities strengthen the province's transnational ties, contributing to the growth of migrant, entrepreneurial, and intellectual networks—each of which plays an enduring role in cultivating “relational productive power”.³⁸ These networks not only facilitate direct economic exchanges but also help build long-lasting ties that go beyond simple trade or investment.

The case of Zhejiang Province demonstrates how its economic structure and position within the Chinese economy shape its distinct interests and approaches in engaging with African partners. The province leverages its distinctive economic landscape by tailoring its competitive advantages (e.g. sector-specific expertise) and addressing its domestic challenges, aiming to expand its investment in Africa and strengthen its trade relations and to foster digital cooperation.

However, despite the ambitious objectives articulated by Zhejiang's provincial and municipal governments to broaden the footprint of enterprises in African markets, there remain some gaps in their approach. The predominant focus on metrics of quantitative expansion (e.g. trade volumes and enterprise numbers) diverts attention from critical consideration of sustainability, reinforcing dependency and economic asymmetries rather than fostering the inclusive and transformative growth needed to support African countries' long-term development goals. Moreover, in promoting increased investment from Zhejiang to Africa, many Zhejiang enterprises have adopted a clustered investment strategy. This has resulted in a high concentration of investment in similar sectors or value chains, creating intense homogeneous competition. Such competition not only diminishes the uniqueness of each investment but also undermines overall efficacy, reducing the potential to generate meaningful, long-term impact.³⁹

³⁷ Online exchange with the entrepreneur WeChat, 2023.

³⁸ Lina Benabdallah, *Shaping the Future of Power: Knowledge Production and Network-Building in China-Africa Relations* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2020).

³⁹ Multiple interviews with Africa-based Zhejiang entrepreneurs and Chinese scholars, Dar es Salaam, Lusaka, Beijing, 2019-2023.

Policy Recommendations

The necessity for African policymakers to formulate a “China Strategy” has been widely discussed. However, this approach may not be comprehensive. It is becoming clear that for African nations engaging regularly with specific Chinese provinces, a more nuanced “province-specific strategy” is vital, in order to take into consideration China’s substantial subnational differences so that African states can more effectively navigate the complexities. Despite the often-perceived asymmetry in China–Africa relations, formulating tailored “province strategies” could provide African countries with greater bargaining power. For instance, in dealing with Zhejiang province, where trade is a critical area of focus, African countries could prioritize reducing trade barriers, promoting the export of value-added goods through incentives for local processing, and fostering business partnerships that can encourage technology transfer. For smaller African economies (e.g. Chad, Senegal), looking to attract Chinese FDI, it may not be prudent to target well-recognized provinces such as Zhejiang, given their already saturated investment landscapes and established partnerships with countries such as Rwanda, Tanzania, and South Africa. Instead, focusing on provinces of a smaller economic scale but with international experience may offer more opportunities for negotiation.

Moreover, despite the stark differences in the political system of Germany and China, the active engagement of Chinese subnational actors in promoting economic ties and cooperation with Africa also offers insights to Germany. Despite the federal architecture not traditionally envisaging a pronounced role in foreign policy for the *Bundesländer* (federal states) and municipalities, it is important that other subnational actors—including corporations, business associations, and nongovernmental organizations—intensify their engagement with African nations. These actors are essential for fostering sustainable economic partnerships, encouraging socio-economic development, and facilitating academic and cultural exchanges, offering a more effective complement to traditional diplomatic efforts and aid-centric approaches.

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