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Journal of Asian and African Studies 2014 49: 251 originally published online 11 June 2013
DOI: 10.1177/0021909613485217

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Version of Record - May 15, 2014
OnlineFirst Version of Record - Jun 11, 2013
What is This?
As China Returns: Perceptions of Land Grabbing and Spatial Power Relations in Mozambique

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Abstract
This article investigates how perceptions of China in Mozambican civil society are affected by entrepreneurial activity and bilateral cooperation between China and Mozambique – real, imagined, visible and legal as well as clandestine and illegal in the agricultural and forestry sectors. The research problem concerns how discourse on Chinese investors is formed in Mozambique. Two questions are posed. How does Mozambican civil society perceive their room to maneuver at a time of Chinese growing economic interest and ‘return’ to Africa? What views exist on the policy space for the national government? Using qualitative ethnographic interviews to answer these overarching questions about expanding/contracting maneuvering space, this article explains how Mozambique’s largest social group – peasants – the National Association of Small Farmers (UNAC) and other societal actors perceive Chinese investors. Informed by theoretical debates on civil society, the article argues that coinciding with China’s large-scale return to Africa, an already tense dynamic between civil society and the state is picking up speed. It is argued that this phenomenon is likely to have more to do with African governments accruing more power and policy space than through direct impact of Chinese economic activity on African social life. However, to avoid negative discourse formation, China and host governments need to become more open on and transparent about bilateral agreements.

Keywords
Africa, China, civil society, land grabbing, Mozambique, policy space

Introduction
Prevalent in much journalistic reportage and in the policy and research discourse on China’s increasing role in African countries is the perception that China is returning to Africa after a passive period between 1978 and 1989 (Alden et al., 2008). The metrics are certainly impressive: volume of trade between China and Africa in 2003 was US$18.5 billion and, in 2012, trade volume was about to reach an all-time-high at more than US$160 billion (Forum on China-Africa Cooperation [FOCAC], 2012). China is the African continent’s single biggest bilateral trading partner and, according to the former deputy director for the Chinese Ministry of Commerce Wei

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Jianguo, it looks set to surpass the European Union as a whole by 2014 when trade volume is projected at US$300–400 billion (Sinocast, 2011). And many observers go further as they note that China is overtaking Western countries in sheer numbers of trade, migrants, loans and not least seems to win people’s hearts and minds on what amounts to effective development and modernization (Kurlantzick, 2009; D Moyo, 2009, 2012; Rosario and Wang, 2011). Notwithstanding this impressive expansion of trade as well as ideational relations, with China’s deeper engagement with African countries has, not least in conflict-ridden areas, also come an increased exposure to security risks due to political instability (Holslag, 2010).

However, it need not be the most violent environment, or the ‘high-politics’ of the international summits such as the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) that will impact most significantly on how Chinese–African relations evolve in the coming years. Social interactions on a daily basis and how such encounters are mediated into public discourse may be even more important for the formation of perceptions. The purpose of this article is to investigate the formation of the discourse on contracting and expanding spaces of power in Mozambique at the time of China’s large-scale return to the continent. Thus the research problem concerns the ongoing transformation of, on the one hand, the maneuvering space of civil society and, on the other hand, policy space for the government. Many factors such as Western donor agencies, international financial organizations, multilateral companies and different domestic actors obviously influence this discourse. Another influential and emerging factor that impacts on the discourse on China’s policies, behavior and presence in Africa feeds on news reports, rumors about as well as everyday existing interactions between Chinese migrant laborers and entrepreneurs and African citizens.

Taking Mozambique as its case, this article investigates how perceptions of China by parts of Mozambican civil society are affected by existing and rumored Chinese entrepreneurial activity and the Chinese state’s cooperation with the Mozambican government – the visible and the legal as well as the clandestine and illegal. Two research questions are posed. First, how do segments of one particular segment of civil society – particularly the country’s largest social group, the peasants, through the representatives of the National Association of Small Farmers (Uniao Nacional de Camponeses [UNAC]) perceive Chinese investors and entrepreneurial activities? This question is asked against the background of rumors of land grabbing and reports about both legal investment and illegal activities, so-called ‘takeaway’ in the forestry sector. Second, what do UNAC and other actors in Mozambican society think of transformations of maneuvering space for non-state actors and policy space for the national government in light of the increasing economic clout of especially China’s but also other emerging economies?

Scholars on Sino-African relations have uncovered many flaws in news reporting on the impact of Chinese companies and individual entrepreneurs in African countries (Brautigam, 2009). Yet there is a need to go deeper into existing discourses of ‘the other’ (Lagerkvist, 2009, 2010). Only dispelling myths and flaws about numbers of immigrants, investment statistics and the size of Chinese foreign aid is important but not enough. Why mythmaking exists and how discourse on China is formed is also a crucial issue to investigate. What kinds of conditions allow for false facts to circulate in the first place? Although important, battling the incorrect facts and accounts that are the end product of that process is merely a never-ending whack-a-mole game. If the foundations of myth-making are not thoroughly understood then misinformed discourse will continue to shape the outcome of real-life south–south interaction and cooperation.

The focus on Mozambique and its agricultural and forestry sectors merits attention for two reasons. First, in the eyes of foreign investors Mozambique has a huge potential for agricultural development.¹ Second, in recent years, numerous independent reports about illegal logging by Chinese companies in northern Mozambique have been produced alongside widespread rumors about
incoming large-scale settlements of Chinese farmers in the fertile Zambezia Province. These latter rumors have been taken at face value and distributed further by some observers (Horta, 2008), who have in turn been roundly criticized by others (Brautigam and Ekman, 2012). Yet there is a need to probe in-depth how discourse and perspectives are formed. To that end, this article proceeds in three steps. First, there is a description of the methodology employed for the collection of data, followed by an introduction of the conceptual framework of civil society in a non-Western setting such as Mozambique. Second, I account for the perceptions and conflicting ideas of China in Mozambique through the prism of on-going foreign land acquisitions and logging activities. Third, there is a discussion on the impact that China’s increasing presence in Mozambique is believed to have on state–society relations, which sheds more light on the sensitivities to of spatial power relations between government and society.

**Materials and Methodology**

As can be expected, given the range of settings and situations, perceptions oscillate between the negative and the positive regarding Chinese economic activity brought to countries as varied as, for example, Mozambique, Nigeria, and Sudan (Askouri, 2007; Carling and Haugen, 2008; Lemos and Ribeiro, 2007; Obiorah, 2007). Yet, overall, quantitative opinion polls conducted in 2007 and 2009 by the Pew Institute (n.d.) and the annual surveys by Afrobarometer (n.d.) have shown African populations across the continent to be on average quite positive about Chinese investments and company presence. In order to gain a deeper understanding of popular views in Mozambican civil society on the Chinese presence, I conducted qualitative ethnographic fieldwork in the capital Maputo in December 2010. Altogether 13 informants in civil society organizations, officialdom, the academia, and the foreign diplomatic community were interviewed. Among these, three persons were with UNAC. One person represented the very small non-governmental organization (NGO) Justiça Nacional, which finances much of its reports and studies from support from Western aid organizations and universities. Two people from the international business community were interviewed. Two people worked within the academic community. Two other people that I interviewed were with the Foreign Ministry. Three of those interviewed were diplomats, two from Sweden and one from Japan. As most informants spoke on the condition of being anonymous, only some of the interviewees stand with their full names in this article. The strategy for the selection of individuals to interview was largely based upon recommendations of senior and retired foreign diplomats who had previously worked as ambassadors and country experts in Mozambique. Some of the informants pointed me to the other informants. All interviews were conducted face-to-face for between 60 to 90 minutes, following an open-ended interview guide of questions (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002). Through the conducted interviews and the interviewees’ experiences of and views on land grabbing in Mozambique, perceptions of Chinese investments in bio-fuels, agribusiness, and logging projects could be analyzed.

The views and perspectives of the country’s largest peasant organization, UNAC – which can be described as a quasi-non-governmental mass organization since its historic ties to the Leninist party-state are strong – stand at the center of the analysis in this article. Although their views do not represent Mozambican civil society as a whole, and do not even enjoy the support of peasants in some parts of the country, especially in the northern provinces, they nevertheless offer an informative lens of how large-scale aid and business projects and investments from China, other emerging economies, foreign multinational companies, and Western countries compete for influence in Mozambique. In Maputo I met with three informants of UNAC. I interviewed the leader of the organization, Diamantino Nhampossa, and one of its legal experts in a joint meeting. At a separate
occasion I met with a former UNAC representative who had shifted to a job with a government entity. The views of this elite stratum of UNAC on transformations of power relations were complemented and contextualized by other informants in academia, grassroots organizations, the business world and state officials who were also interviewed. The open-ended general questions and issues covered were the same during all the conversations: they related to the bilateral relationship of China and Mozambique and its potential implications for emergent civil society and state power in terms of maneuvering space of the former and policy space of the latter; and the existing worries about land grabs and deforestation related to the increasing presence of Chinese economic activities. Naturally, depending on the professional capacity of the informant, add-on questions related to their personal working experience with Chinese diplomats, academics, and businessmen were asked.

As early as the 1960s, China started to support the military struggle of the liberation movement Frelimo against the colonial power Portugal (Ogunsanwo, 1974: 233). That laid the foundation for continued cooperation after independence from Portugal was finally attained in 1975. Yet as Mozambique chose to work closer with the Soviet Union in the late 1970s, followed by a lengthy civil war against the rebel organization Renamo that ended in 1992, it took until meetings in 1997 to establish Sino-Mozambican relations on their current trajectory. That year marked the establishment of a Chinese government fund, which aimed to attract investment from China to Mozambique. During the last 10 years, several economic agreements on aid, infrastructure and debt cancellation have been worked out. Contemporary Sino-Mozambican relations take place in a shifting setting, where traditional donors used to contribute to more than half of the national budget, and since the beginning of the 1990s supported the growth of an emergent civil society in the capital Maputo. However, due to the economic recession in Western donor countries since 2008, their overseas development assistance (ODA) for budget support has diminished. In 2010 foreign aid covered as much as 51.4% of the Mozambican budget, and in 2011 that share dropped to 44.6%. For the year 2012, the Mozambican Finance Minister, Manuel Chang, forecasted that this figure would shrink to 39.6% (All Africa, 2011). Running parallel to this downward trajectory, however, Chinese economic activity and financial assistance and technical support for infrastructure development increase unabated. China’s trade with Mozambique has expanded significantly in recent years. According to official Chinese statistics, Sino-Mozambican total trade volume amounted to US$517 million in 2009 and US$697 million in 2010. From January through October 2011 bilateral trade stood at US$761 million, an increase from the same period of the previous year by 36% (Chinese Embassy, 2012). Of this trade, US$581 million were Chinese exports, whereas China imported Mozambican goods, mainly natural resources such as timber, iron ore, and agricultural products to a value of US$180 million. As in other African countries, the most visible aspects of this increasing activity and trade are Chinese companies initiating large-scale infrastructure projects such as the building of new roads, refurbishing of deep-water ports, and construction of low-income housing. However, some analysts in Mozambique have argued that there is an inconsistent dialogue between Beijing and Maputo, which lacks a long-term commitment and vision (Roque, 2009: 2). Today, in spite of already significant implications of Chinese presence in Mozambique – real and imagined – only the pragmatist part of the ‘revolutionary pragmatism’ (Ogunsanwo, 1974) that once characterized China’s Africa policy under its first Prime Minister Zhou Enlai remains.

Theoretical Framework

Since the beginning of the ‘third wave’ of democratization and the East European ‘velvet revolutions’ in the beginning of the 1990s, civil society quickly climbed the ladder in academic and
policy discourses about democratization. Relating to the situation in many African countries, it was
presumed that civil society would be an ideal support pillar for both initial and subsequent phases
of democratization (Bratton, 1989, 1994). This idea was picked up by the Western policy commu-
nity with significant consequences for a development assistance paradigm, which came to focus
more on active support for building new, and strengthening existing, social organizations judged to
be beneficial for the construction of democracy through the idea of development (Mercer, 2003;
Pupavac, 2010; Sörensen, 2010). How the concept of civil society should be understood in a non-
Western, post-colonial, post-Marxist and one-party dominant setting such as Mozambique is part
of larger theoretical debates. The ideal-type construction of civil society as inherently progressive
and furthering the task of democratization in African countries has been criticized in both nuanced
(Kasfir, 2004), and not so nuanced ways (Manji, 2008). It has also been argued that the interplay
between state, market and civil society is much more complex than that posited by a sharp dichot-
omy between state and civil society, often oversimplified and at times viewed through a Western
ethnocentric lens (Alagappa, 2004; Hann and Dunn, 1996). Indeed, there is ample evidence of
international financial institutions (IFI) and Western donor countries that artificially and unproduc-
tively prop up quickly emerging civil society organizations (CSOs) in urban areas, rather than
engaging with already existing community-based organizations in the remote countryside.³
The political philosopher John Keane has argued that the term civil society:

both describes and envisages a complex and dynamic ensemble of legally protected non-governmental
institutions that tend to be non-violent, self-organizing, self-reflexive, and permanently in tension with
each other and with the state institutions that ‘frame’, constrict and enable their activities. (1998: 6)

The notions about constant socio-political tensions and the existence of both constraining as well
as enabling factors are universal observations and they are useful for an informed discussion about
state–society relations also in a non-Western context such as Mozambique. It is, however, impor-
tant to note that not all constraining effects on emerging civil societies derive from conflicting
interests with the nation-state. To survive, expand and achieve tangible results, many NGOs also
have to frame their activities so they don’t create unproductive tension with the donor agencies of
foreign state actors and international financial institutions. How the extended arm of ‘Northern’
NGOs adapted to not upset the authorities in sub-Saharan Africa as well as Western donor agencies
in the late 1990s has been severely criticized (Manji, 2008: 185). Northern subjective identity
regarding an anti-state civil society model and narrow interest should not be underestimated, for,
as has been noted by Nelson Kasfir: ‘Perhaps it is the absence of embeddedness of civil society
organizations, particularly those engaged in civil advocacy, that makes them so attractive to propo-
nents of the conventional approach’ (1998: 137). To Kasfir, these proponents were the Western
NGOs that lamented the weakness, and in some countries absence, of African civil society. His
argument alongside that of Bayart’s (1986: 118), was that, if these civil societies became stronger,
they could actually do more harm than good for democratization: ‘enabling civil society organiza-
tions to become more aggressive makes it hard for the state to mediate among competing interest
groups.’

The thrust of this idea was that blindly strengthening civil society could also inadvertently lead
to societal fragmentation, as uncivil social groupings found more space to maneuver. Moreover,
since demands from domestic NGOs, foreign donors and international financial institutions inun-
dated weak states it became harder for the state to remedy inadvertent social fragmentation. Some
of these divisive tendencies were spurred by the usual ‘uncivil suspects;’ that is, extreme ethnic
nationalists, religious fundamentalists, and bands of organized crime loyal neither to state
institutions nor society at large. The intriguing issue with China’s ‘return’ to Africa is how elements of civil society, agents of the nation-state, and local businesses in different countries perceive the real or imagined challenges that Chinese investments, foreign aid and migration present to their countries.

International Land Acquisitions for Agribusiness

According to the United Nation’s Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), ‘lack of investment in agriculture over decades has meant continuing low productivity and stagnant production in many developing countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa’ (Hallam, 2010: 3). Moreover, FAO estimates that investments in the vicinity of US$83 billion would be needed annually if developing countries are to meet the food needs of their populations by 2050. In the case of Mozambique, it possesses 36 million hectares of arable land, of which only 12% are currently being used. However, both scholars and civil society organizations such as UNAC contest the interpretation and definition of ‘idle’ land in these official figures. Such contention is due to the increase in international land deals and contested dynamics about land development, as have been highlighted by both national and international NGOs. Therefore it is not surprising that scholars of many disciplines have in recent years begun to study the phenomenon of land grabbing (see Cotula, 2009; World Bank, 2010). Developing nations usually face similar problems related to insufficient legal protection of local land use. Therefore there is a broad concern among local constituencies and national and international NGOs that the temptation on the part of powerful local political actors may lead to concealment of the true implications and legal problems concerning the purchase of land, for both local peasants and foreign investors. Mozambique shares a common challenge with other sub-Saharan countries in this regard, as the narrative of ‘multiple win’ for all actors – state, society, and outside investors – loom large when the issue of food security is raised. A high-level informant with Mozambique’s foreign ministry testified to the mutual interest between East Asian countries and Mozambique to develop agricultural production:

The Koreans are interested in the same things as the Chinese – natural resources. A recent delegation from South Korea wanted to meet with the Minister for resources. But we suspect that their main interest might lie in land. This issue is fast becoming a hot topic.

Even if there seems to be much domestic Mozambican economic interest (Brautigam and Ekman, 2012), which prompted the interest of these East Asian state actors in Mozambican land and natural resources in the first place, the abovementioned official was very clear that there is indeed concrete manifestations of interest from Korean and Chinese investor delegations. Certainly, China’s trade with Mozambique has increased rapidly in recent years. China is now Mozambique’s second largest trading partner after South Africa. The official figure of Mozambican export to China, however, is just a fraction of the real values exported, as illegally logged timber exported to Asian markets does not show in national statistics.

Negotiations for lease of land for both industrial and agricultural production are in very thorny territory for reasons of legal haziness and identity, and therefore there is strong public sentiment about it (Cabanelas et al., 2011). This is because it involves socio-economic and food security aspects as much as food sovereignty and customary rights to the land. And, as many NGO representatives in Mozambique testify, the acquisition and large-scale cultivation of land is indeed fraught with tension (see The Oakland Institute, 2011). Thus national agricultural and forestry policies in Africa tie into the trend of a scramble for African land, as evidenced in recent years by
debates about extensive land grabbing in Africa – imagined or actually existing – involving state actors from the Global North as well as the Global South. That agricultural produce in Africa is now part of a global food security chain stretching also to China is evident from recent statistics. The Chinese government reported that agricultural imports from Africa increased by 45.2% to reach US$2.33 billion in 2011 (Xinhuanet, 2012).

China has expressed a willingness to develop the low productivity that has been a longstanding problem for African countries, which face the prospect of both population growth and urbanization. A Chinese white paper on China’s cooperation with African countries published in 2006 articulated the development potential for African agriculture:

At the Fourth Ministerial conference of the FOCAC it was agreed that ‘In order to further strengthen agricultural cooperation and improve African countries’ capacity for food security, China will increase to 20 the total number of agricultural technology demonstration centers built for African countries, send 50 agricultural technology teams to Africa and help train 2000 agricultural technicians for African countries. (Gov.cn, 2010)

Some observers, however, project herein a concern for China’s own food security (von Braun and Meinzen-Dick, 2009: 1), whereby agricultural aid and knowledge transfer stations in other developing countries are the entry points for large-scale efforts to secure enough land somewhere to feed a fully industrialized China in the longer term (Freemantle and Stevens, 2011). The Chinese government refers to such statements as: ‘groundless and not factual, we have not hoarded any farmland overseas and have taken no steps to introduce any such policy’ (Li, 2008: para. 2).

Objective facts are hard to come by, although serious scholarship examining the intent of the progress of these centers and Chinese investments in the agribusiness and the biofuels sector on the ground seems to support the arguments of the Chinese state (Brautigam and Ekman, 2012; Brautigam and Tang, 2009). Nonetheless, due to the opaque nature of Sino-Mozambican state-to-state bilateral relations it is difficult to access information about the current levels of both state and entrepreneurial activity in both the agricultural and forestry sectors. That is understandable due to lack of open and systematic national statistics in several African countries and no systematic research of Chinese state-owned and private farming companies on the ground. Worse, however, are the unchecked media and business reports that trickle down in African civil society and continue to encourage unfounded rumors. When Standard Bank in its report ‘China’s food security challenge: what role for Africa,’ published on 18 November, mentioned an unsubstantiated ‘memorandum of understanding allegedly signed between China and Mozambique in 2007, which would allow for the relocation of 3,000 Chinese farmers in the Zambezia and Tete Provinces’ the bank underwrote a sinister cycle of rumors and myths that recent scholarship has sought to dispel (Brautigam, 2012). One of the CSO informants interviewed for this article in Maputo debunked that very rumor saying that ‘No, that project with the proposed 3,000 Chinese settlers in the Zambezia valley never happened.’ Another statement that also found its way into the rumor mill was a May 2008 statement by Li Zhengdong, the director for international cooperation with China’s Ministry of Agriculture, in which he proclaimed that the State Council was in negotiations with Mozambique to lease land for cereal production (Horta, 2011). Maputo later denied the accuracy of this statement.

Several of the informants interviewed for this study talked about problems related to transparency, such as the lack of up-to-date statistics and registers on land deals. The opaque nature of these business agreements contributes to the spread of false information about large-scale Chinese peasant migration to the most fertile and productive farmland in Mozambique and elsewhere in
sub-Saharan Africa. One Mozambican informant spoke of the fearful climate that non-transparent transactions as well as the rumors about them create:

The National Peasants’ Union (UNAC) held a meeting here three weeks ago. Hundreds of local stories were intensely discussed. The basic takeaway was that the government no longer looked after and cared for them. And clearly, there was also a new xenophobic component toward outsiders – especially Chinese.10

Yet as mentioned in the beginning of this article, the Afrobarometer quantitative surveys that have been conducted in Mozambique in recent years continue to show strong support among ordinary people for China’s presence and economic engagement. This is quite remarkable given the bad press and subsequent rumors that Chinese companies, products, and services have received in recent years. Arguably such negative information should affect the views of people ‘in the street.’ Yet, according to round four of the 2008 Afrobarometer survey, out of the 1200 respondents in Mozambique asked about how much ‘help was received’ from China, 33% said it ‘helped a lot,’ whereas 16% responded that China ‘helped somewhat’ and the rest did not have a clear opinion (Afrobarometer, n.d.).11 In spite of all the negative press and NGO research that criticize Chinese state-owned companies and private firms as bad employers in African countries,12 many Mozambicans who certainly have heard stories about how hard Chinese employers treat their employees nonetheless hold that China contributes a lot to development.13 Therefore it seems, so far at least, to be just plenty of rumors. According to the President of UNAC, Diamantino Nhampossa, there were no reasons to single out Chinese people as land-grabbers: ‘There are not any Chinese people doing this on a large scale for now. They are engaged in logging, not planting bio-fuels or food crops.’14 The Pew Institute study of African countries showed that populations across the continent were overwhelmingly positive toward Chinese investments and the increasing presence of Chinese companies. Likewise, a survey by Sautman and Yan (2009) also showed positive results among university students. Ethnographic studies, however, points in the opposite direction (Lee, 2009). In my own pilot study conducted in 2008, evidence from interviews with NGO representatives and state officials in Tanzania and Zambia countered the Pew Institute’s quantitative opinion studies as well as sensationalist writings in Western mass media about supposedly naive African officials and intellectuals (Lagerkvist, 2009). Divergence of perspectives in the research field is partly a result of lack of empirical evidence, partly from using different methodologies (Lagerkvist and Jonsson, 2011: 11). Therefore it is paramount to collect first-hand data directly in the field. It is of course also feasible that the oral witnessing picked up through qualitative ethnographic studies will show in later rounds of the quantitative surveys of the Afrobarometer.

Conflicting Ideas about Land Acquisitions

Land acquisitions are increasingly becoming contested issues in Mozambique. To a certain extent contentious politics related to domestic land grabbing is related to both the international phenomenon of land grabbing and the global discourse that surrounds it among policymakers, advocacy groups and international business, investment funds and lobby groups. According to the Portuguese entrepreneur and business consultant Antonio Branco, the agribusiness sector is expanding because overseas investors perceive Mozambique as a quite stable country today. It therefore attracts investors, which could mean food security and food production both for the investor countries and the local market. Branco believes that the agricultural sector is where the
Chinese experience could prove especially valuable: ‘small-scale farming will never make the
economy take off in Mozambique – that was not what jump-started the Chinese economy.’ Nevertheless, many observers in African countries and beyond wonder if the benefits of foreign direct investment (FDI) into the Mozambican agricultural sector will be a quadruple-win for all concerned: the foreign multinational biofuel companies, the emerging climate change regime, the national government, and local communities. A critical analysis of the now dormant ProCana agro fuels project in Mozambique’s Gaza Province indicates the risk that the benefits of projects such as these are reduced to a double-win, where the foreign investor is subsidized at the expense of local farmers who worry about dispossession and dislocation. Obviously, for these projects to come about there must be something in it for the national government, and in this case it is President Guebuza, who apparently seeks a new investor for the huge ProCana 30,000 ha project (Borras et al., 2011: 232). As the informant Daniel Ribeiro of Justiça Nacional in Maputo stated regarding potential kickbacks to high-level dignitaries from foreign-invested bio-fuels projects in Gaza Province:

There is a grabbing of the land. Just look at former President Chissano, an old dog in his native Gaza Province. Big dogs with influence get land passed onto them. So, you see, the whole system is corrupt – every cog of it. The community leaders who pass on the land use rights are corrupt, as are sometimes these very communities too.16

This is a contrarian view to the economists and business consultants who often argue that fast development of the agricultural sector and land sales are the logical way to develop the national economy and proceed comes from non-governmental organizations. Ribeiro argues that land grabbing is a serious problem due to the illegal use of land rights. According to him, the logging sector and bio-fuels agribusinesses in the north of the country are especially problematic: ‘In the north there is widespread talk of the negative Chinese impact on the environment due to uncontrolled logging.’ In his research Ribeiro described how 1,000 logs of hardwood, illegally cut down by the Mozambican–Chinese joint venture MOFID, was seized in the northern port of Nacala in 2007 (Ribeiro, 2010). The Mozambican researcher Eduardo Namburete also described the depletion of forests in the north and of the timber sector as a problem of mutual collusion, where state officials and retired generals all ask for a 10% commission and there is nothing that the people, the media or NGOs can do to stop it: ‘the Chinese companies are not playing by the rules, and they are very much engaged in these practices.’ Another concrete case of such collusion was a Mozambican–Chinese joint venture that illegally cut down rare black wood in the Gile National Reserve. What is the allowed quota – in a year – of the tree Dalbergia melanoxylon was allegedly logged and exported to China (Carmody, 2011). During my interview with the President of UNAC, Diamantino Nhampossa, he emphasized that it may seem as if a lot of land is not being cultivated, but that does not mean that people do not use it. However, in its communications with foreign investors, the government says that there is plenty of unused land. Downplaying – or worse, hiding – the true circumstances of a land deal means that investors may end up in drawn-out conflicts about land rights with local farmers.

According to UNAC, these small rural communities seldom fully understand the deals that they have signed. Villagers may not understand, for instance, that a company may want to use a certain piece of land for as long as 25 years. Nhampossa also described how the situation has become more unstable and volatile in the north of Mozambique, especially in Niassa Province where many private Chinese businessmen have been involved in illegal logging activities for years (Mackenzie, 2006).
Expanding Government Policy Space, Contraction of Civil Society Space

Eduardo Namburete observed two parallel shifts in the politics of Mozambique during the past decade. When President Chissano left office in 2004, it marked the beginning of a new era and a rapid shift toward courting China. At the same time, there was a clear shift away from his more consultative way of dealing with the opposition and civil society and a rollback toward the old one-party system. Namburete was quite pessimistic about Mozambique’s future, as well as the potential role of civil society as NGOs are weak, and controlled and financed by the government.

It is evident that NGOs in Mozambique are having a more difficult time and are under more pressure than before, especially if compared to its neighbor Zambia where civil society has grown in strength with democratic consolidation. Some of the Mozambican informants, such as Daniel Ribeiro, gave examples of harassment of his organization when investigating corruption or illegal deals made by politically well-connected people. When asked about the role of Western donors in this context, most interviewees did not see much scope for action or support generating positive results. Eduardo Namburete, for example, believed that the outside world could do little. Donors earmark funding for NGOs, which is distributed through the government budget, but donors do not wish a deteriorating relationship with the government of Mozambique. Western governments want to maintain their influence and to hold up Mozambique as an African role model that has been lifted out of misery. Consequently, they are reluctant to finance and undergird a confrontation between civil society and the government. Other informants thought that confrontation should be avoided, but that, given the stresses that civil society organizations face, foreign governments and aid organizations ought nevertheless to consider directly financing some NGOs in Mozambique. At present, these NGOs dare not campaign on popular issues as they are dependent on the government for funding. Moreover, Daniel Ribeiro was not optimistic about the political winds blowing at the top echelons of the ruling party Frelimo:

It seems that the younger generation inside the party is more of adherents to the business faction. They also have China as an authoritarian capitalist model, which to them stands out as an inspiration that they can follow.

This claim is significant as it indicates that China’s state-owned companies and government may feel more at ease with the situation in Mozambique as compared to other more pluralist and ‘NGO-rich’ African nations. To some extent, however, it is still a learning process. China’s policy banks, Eximbank and China Development Bank, held a meeting with the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) in Maputo at the beginning of 2010 to gain a better understanding of how foreign investors are perceived by civil society. The underlying reason for the meeting was that Chinese companies had treated workers in Mozambique harshly. The Chinese have a hard and rigorous work ethic and do not accept employees who are late for work or break the rules. As a result, there is a perception in civil society that ‘the Chinese’ are not learning from, or adapting enough, to the local situation in Mozambique. The impression given by the different NGO activists and academics in Mozambique is that civil society actors are coming under more pressure. One informant argued that the government is becoming more confident:

New actors mean more policy space. Now President Guebuza can say to the Western donors ‘ok, if you don’t like it, then we go ask the Chinese instead.’ That would have been impossible in the 1990s, when 90% of the state budget came from donor funding.
The above argument supports the notion that China does increase the policy space of the national government, and ‘reduces Maputo’s dependence on traditional donors’ (Roque, 2009: 14). Arguably, such perceptions of an increase of government financing options and expanded policy space, due to the arrival of the strong emerging economies of the Global South, correspond to shrinking maneuvering space for non-governmental organizations in Mozambique.

**Democratic Reversal and Rollback for Civil Society?**

As shown in the above section, independent academics and activists with NGOs in Mozambique come across as relatively pessimistic about Mozambique’s political future. They view the government as being empowered by new opportunities afforded by emerging economies such as the People’s Republic of China. Moreover, they see the role of emergent civil society and dependent NGOs as weak. These organizations continue to be controlled and financed by the government in an atmosphere where Western donor support is diminishing and articulation of Western moral support for NGOs is also feeble. Thus it is evident that NGOs in Mozambique are having a more difficult time and are under more pressure than previously.

Ten years later than Nelson Kasfirs’s writing of his apprehension that African states would be engulfed by Western-funded civil societies, another scholar, Ndubisi Obiorah of Nigeria, held one of the central challenges for civil society in Africa in the next few years to be ‘an effort to prevent democratic reversal especially an “intellectual rollback” to the 1970s’ (2007: 46). He attributed the major reason for the erosion of African activists’ leverage in issues of human rights and democracy to be African governments’ increasing cooperation with China (p. 47).

Whereas some African states and governments have become stronger during the last decade, partly due to increasing policy space originating from increasing aid and loans from emerging economies of the Global South (Huse and Muyakwa, 2008: 25), other and perhaps more important factors than the return and increasing presence of China in Africa also contribute to the increasing policy space that was lost during the 1990s, when globalization for African states became synonymous with the financial governance dictates of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. Certainly, space has increased due to global competition for natural resources. But also because of sustained economic growth during the last decade, a concomitant rise of commodity prices and, since reaching the Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) completion point, the easier access to loans on financial markets (Kragelund, 2008). For policymakers these changes mean expanded space for initiating new policies. In line with Obiorah, one could argue that this ‘rollback’ has left the intellectual drawing board and is now being implemented in the real world. This phenomenon is already visible in that African states such as Ethiopia, Sudan, Sierra Leone, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe are drafting and implementing new NGO laws and establishing registration procedures that constrain NGO work and ‘restrict civil space’ (The International Center for Not-for-Profit Law [ICNL], 2011; B Moyo, 2009). Such reports go against the spirit and words of article 12 of the African Union’s ‘African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance,’ which clearly calls on state parties to: ‘Create conducive conditions for civil society organizations to exist and operate within the law (United Nations [UN], 2007). The return of the concept of civil society in Western policy and donors’ discourse in the 1990s meant overseas development assistance came to focus more on civil society and non-governmental organizations than before. However, that hardly made them more embedded and integrated within the national framework of state–society relations. The abovementioned recent rollback of constraining civil society by way of implementing rigorous registration processes in a number of African countries is illustrative of this latent and continuing disconnect. This ongoing transformation has led some African NGOs to back
away from foreign donor money, to avoid the agendas of civil society organizations becoming
demonized in the eyes of governments.\(^{21}\) In line with the argument that civil society assumes non-
governmental institutions that are permanently in tension with each other and with the state institutions that ‘‘frame”, constrict and enable their activities’’ (Keane, 1998: 6), for the good of society, it is important to note that the already tense dynamic between civil society and some African states may grow worse as emerging economies such as China ‘‘return’’ to Africa. This phenomenon has to do with African governments getting policy space back, and increasing Chinese economic activity is becoming a more important factor in that equation. Viewed in the broader light of African leaders’ rhetoric about having a China exit option, if Western donors complain about the pace of political reform, socio-political transformation in Africa today needs to account for how China impacts on spatial power relations.

### Conclusion

To return to the research questions posed at the beginning of this article: how do actors in Mozambican society, especially the small landowners’ organization (UNAC), perceive Chinese entrepreneurial activity? And what do these actors make of spatial power relations between civil society and the state at a time of increasing Chinese economic activity in Mozambique? The remarks made by the informants interviewed for this study illustrate fears of how the activities of Chinese economic actors and their sometimes non-transparent package deals with the government lead to an empowered national government and shrinking of the maneuvering space of NGOs. On the other hand, the informants also admit that, apart from illegal logging activities and deforestation practices in Mozambique’s northern provinces, there is ‘‘much smoke, but little fire.’ The main culprit in their narrative is the secrecy, non-transparent and corrupt practices of the Mozambican government and powerful politicians.

Using evidence from fieldwork conducted in the capital Maputo in December 2010, this article shows that rumors about land grabbing as well as existing illegal logging of forests are impacted by as well as impact on everyday interactions between Mozambicans and Chinese. Discussions on rumors, half-truths and correct facts lead to a discourse on China that informs perceptions on the nature and balance of state and civil society relations. It is beyond doubt that state-owned companies and small-scale private entrepreneurs from China, as well as multinational companies from Western countries and other BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) nations, are becoming more involved in natural resource extraction, the forestry sector, and investing in farmland for biofuels production. At this particular juncture, non-governmental organizations and academics in Maputo are worried about current trends of increasing policy space for the government and shrinking room to maneuver for NGOs. At a time when Western donor support to both the national budget and NGOs are cut back, they also worry that the potential benefits of increasing trade with China and the economic growth generated therefrom do not trickle down to benefit all social groups in society. As shown in this article, it is evident that those at the lowest rungs of society, such as small-scale landowners, are fearful of the prospect of government and overseas investors sealing secretive land deals and condoning illegal logging.

Notions of clandestine Chinese economic activity, such as illegal logging, are likely to continue to shape everyday interactions between Chinese migrant entrepreneurs and African civil societies. To better assess this and other emerging economies’ full impact on local civil societies regarding land acquisitions and other investment deals, the national government of Mozambique and other African nations – together with China – need to become more open on bilateral agreements and become more transparent and less secretive. Otherwise, local communities will continue to fear
becoming displaced from their land based on hearsay, foreign investors disappointed because of false marketing, and the national government further discredited.

Acknowledgement
I would like to express my thanks to the anonymous reviewers of this article.

Funding
This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Notes
1. Interview with Western diplomat, Maputo, 14 December, and a Nordic investor in the biofuels sector, Maputo, 9 December 2010.
2. Interview in Maputo, 13 December 2010.
3. Interviews with one Sudanese academic and one Sudanese activist from Khartoum University, Stockholm, 19 April 2012.
4. Borras et al. forcefully argue in their article that ‘the notion of existing, available marginal lands is fundamentally flawed’ (2011: 216).
5. Interview in Maputo, 8 December 2010.
6. Of the goods exchanged in 2009, US$339 million were Chinese exports, whereas China imported Mozambican goods, mainly natural resources such as minerals (19%), timber (69%), and agricultural products (12%) to a value of US$178 million (China Statistical Yearbook, 2010).
7. The first sentence of The International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty’s (2007: para. 1) definition captures how food sovereignty is understood by a global network of small-scale farmers and their representatives: ‘the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems.’
8. Due to the non-transparent nature of both national statistics on farm deals in Africa and China, knowledge will have to be pieced together by as more individual country studies of Chinese investments are produced and accumulate. See for example Nonfodji (2011) and Buckley (2011).
10. Interview in Maputo, 14 December 2010.
11. The results for China are on par with other countries of importance for Mozambique. The United States (14 and 33%), South Africa (11 and 26%), Portugal (13 and 23%).
12. The Human Rights Watch ‘You’ll be fired if you refuse’ (2011), a report on the working conditions for Zambian workers in mines operated by Chinese state-owned companies, is an illustrative case.
15. Interview in Maputo, 12 December 2010.
17. Interview in Maputo, 11 December 2010.
18. Interview in Maputo, 9 December 2010. Another informant, interviewed in Maputo, in December 2010, also explained how corrupt the timber sector was: ‘Especially the logging scene is corrupt. Nobody in that sector can operate within legal constraints.’
20. Interview in Maputo, in December 2010.
21. See for example LeVan who suggests that the lack of foreign external support for the Save Nigeria Group has indeed increased its credibility and legitimacy as a ‘democratic reform organization with domestic origins’ (LeVan, 2011: 151).
References


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