

IMPROVING CHINA-AFRICA EXPERIENCE SHARING ON GOVERNANCE IN THE EXPLORATION OF PATHS TO MODERNIZATION

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Abstract

This paper examines improving China-Africa experience sharing on governance in the exploration of paths to modernization. Using the library instrument, findings show that, the 21st century has heralded a renewed South-South engagement, with China and Africa emerging as pivotal actors in redefining global governance trajectories. China's remarkable rise from poverty to becoming a leading global power has been underpinned by a unique governance model that combines political centralization with economic experimentation and adaptive capacity. In contrast, many African countries continue to struggle with entrenched developmental and governance challenges, despite abundant resources and youthful populations. The paper concludes that, the search for effective governance mechanisms to achieving modernization has led several African policymakers, scholars, and civil society actors to examine China's experience more closely. However, effective experience sharing requires more than passive learning; it demands critical engagement, contextual adaptation, and equitable partnership as recommended.

Keywords: Governance, experience sharing, path to modernization, Common Prosperity, Peaceful Modernization

Introduction

China's governance model is characterized by its unique integration of centralized political authority and dynamic economic reform strategies. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) maintains tight control over political structures while simultaneously encouraging localized policy innovation and market-oriented development—a dual approach that has come to be known as “adaptive authoritarianism” (Heilmann & Perry, 2011). Following the economic reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping in 1978, China embarked on a path of “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” This approach prioritized pragmatism over ideological rigidity, promoting experimentation through pilot programs and special economic zones (Naughton, 2007). The principle of “crossing the river by feeling the stones” epitomized this adaptive learning approach, allowing for policy flexibility and empirical validation before nationwide implementation.

Institutionally, China's modernization has been supported by strong bureaucratic capacity, long-term planning via Five-Year Plans, and the strategic use of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) to drive infrastructure and industrial development. The state plays a leading role in coordinating sectors of strategic importance, while selectively liberalizing markets in areas that enhance competitiveness (Brandt & Rawski, 2008). The governance system also emphasizes performance-based promotion within the

CCP cadre system, which incentivizes local leaders to meet economic growth and public service benchmarks. This has fostered a culture of meritocratic technocracy, albeit within an undemocratic political framework (Landry, 2008). China's digital governance initiatives—such as e-government platforms, smart cities, and the social credit system—represent the latest phase of its modernization strategy, aimed at enhancing administrative efficiency and social control. These tools are increasingly being showcased to African counterparts as part of China's soft power and technological diplomacy (Creemers, 2017).

While critiques abound regarding civil liberties, transparency, and human rights, China's model has achieved remarkable development outcomes, including lifting over 800 million people out of poverty (World Bank, 2021). The attractiveness of this model lies in its perceived capacity to deliver results without the messiness of pluralistic politics—a point of interest for many African leaders facing governance constraints. However, China's path is not without limitations. Issues such as corruption, regional inequalities, environmental degradation, and over-centralization pose significant governance challenges. These complexities must be critically understood when considering China as a governance reference point. In summary, China's governance and modernization model is contextually grounded, strategically sequenced, and performance-oriented. Its relevance to Africa lies not in replication but in inspiration—providing practical examples of how state capacity, policy learning, and strategic planning can drive transformation under challenging conditions.

Research Objectives

The objective of the paper includes the following:

- i. Examine the principles and practices of China's governance and modernization trajectory.
- ii. Evaluate Africa's governance landscape and emerging innovations.
- iii. Assess existing mechanisms for China-Africa governance cooperation.
- iv. Propose strategic frameworks, recommendations, and implementation strategies to enhance effective experience sharing.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-method qualitative approach, combining:

- i. Secondary analysis of governance and development literature;
- ii. Policy documents and declarations from FOCAC and BRI platforms;
- iii. Case studies from selected African countries;
- iv. Comparative analysis of governance institutions and reforms.

Theoretical Framework: Governance and Modernization

Modernization theory and governance theory provide the conceptual scaffolding for understanding China-Africa experience sharing. Modernization, traditionally conceived as a linear process modeled after the Western trajectory, emphasized industrialization, secularization, bureaucratization, and democratization (Rostow,

1960). However, the applicability of this Eurocentric model to non-Western societies has been widely critiqued for its ethnocentric assumptions and historical determinism (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). Contemporary understandings of modernization emphasize pluralism, suggesting that multiple paths exist, each conditioned by cultural, historical, political, and institutional contexts (Sen, 1999). Governance, in this regard, is seen not merely as government but as the ensemble of mechanisms, processes, and institutions through which authority is exercised, and public goods are delivered (Kjaer, 2004). In China's case, modernization has taken a distinct form often referred to as "authoritarian developmentalism"—a governance model that combines centralized political control with market-oriented reforms and gradual institutional experimentation (Zeng, 2010). This has led to significant improvements in infrastructure, public service delivery, and poverty alleviation without adhering to Western democratic norms.

For African countries, governance has been shaped by colonial legacies, post-independence political instability, structural adjustment programs, and ongoing efforts at democratic consolidation and institutional reform. The diversity of experiences across the continent underscores the inadequacy of one-size-fits-all governance prescriptions (Hyden, 2006). Experience sharing between China and Africa, therefore, should be anchored in the theoretical acceptance of multiple modernities and context-sensitive governance frameworks. Learning should not be unidirectional or imitative but dialogical, adaptive, and reflexive. The emphasis should be on best-fit rather than best-practice solutions, recognizing the embeddedness of governance systems in local socio-political ecologies (Andrews, Pritchett, & Woolcock, 2013). In conclusion, enhancing experience sharing requires a commitment to theoretical humility, critical engagement, and mutual respect. It involves moving beyond simplistic transplants of institutional models to fostering locally grounded innovations inspired by shared developmental goals.

African Governance Experiences: Common Challenges and Emerging Innovations

African governance systems exhibit considerable diversity, shaped by varied colonial histories, socio-political cultures, economic structures, and institutional capacities. Despite this diversity, several common governance challenges persist across the continent, including weak institutional frameworks, limited state capacity, pervasive corruption, and fragile rule of law (van de Walle, 2001). Post-independence Africa witnessed the proliferation of one-party regimes, military dictatorships, and neopatrimonial systems where political loyalty often superseded merit in public administration. The structural adjustment programs (SAPs) of the 1980s and 1990s, promoted by the IMF and World Bank, emphasized economic liberalization but often undermined state institutions, exacerbating public service delivery failures and socio-political discontent (Mkandawire, 2001).

Democratization waves in the late 20th century ushered in multiparty politics and formal checks and balances, but democratic institutions in many countries remain nascent or fragile. Electoral violence, media suppression, and the manipulation of judicial and legislative arms of government persist in several contexts (Diamond, 2008). Despite these challenges, African countries have also demonstrated resilience and innovation in governance. Rwanda, for instance, has gained global attention for its results-oriented governance, strong anti-corruption frameworks, and strategic use

of technology to improve service delivery (Chemouni, 2018). Ghana has built a relatively stable democratic tradition with peaceful transitions of power and a vibrant civil society. Ethiopia has experimented with ethnic federalism, while countries like Kenya and South Africa have adopted progressive constitutional frameworks and engaged in significant judicial reforms.

Technological innovations are also reshaping governance in Africa. The use of digital platforms for tax collection, e-governance portals, biometric voter registration, and mobile-based service delivery are increasing transparency and accountability. Initiatives like Kenya's Huduma Centres and Nigeria's BVN system illustrate how public sector digitization can bridge governance deficits (World Bank, 2020). In addition, regional organizations such as the African Union (AU), ECOWAS, and SADC have increasingly taken proactive roles in promoting democratic norms, conflict resolution, and peer review mechanisms such as the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM). These efforts signify an evolving commitment to endogenous accountability and reform.

However, many innovations remain unevenly implemented and are vulnerable to elite capture and institutional reversals. Strengthening African governance thus requires a dual approach: deepening institutional reforms and leveraging successful innovations through South-South knowledge exchange and policy learning. In this context, the China-Africa experience sharing initiative can provide African countries with comparative examples of institutional development, anti-poverty strategies, bureaucratic effectiveness, and technological application in governance. However, Africa's agency and contextual priorities must shape such exchanges to avoid dependency and ensure meaningful adaptation.

Mechanisms and Platforms for China-Africa Governance Cooperation

China-Africa governance cooperation has expanded significantly over the past two decades, underpinned by high-level forums, bilateral partnerships, and multilateral engagements that have created institutional platforms for policy exchange, technical assistance, and development support. Among the most prominent of these platforms is the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), which since its inception in 2000 has served as the primary multilateral mechanism for fostering strategic dialogue and cooperation (Taylor, 2011). FOCAC summits have prioritized governance-related areas such as public administration, anti-corruption, legal reform, and digital governance. China has committed to capacity-building programs targeting African civil servants, judges, parliamentarians, and policymakers. These programs are delivered through mechanisms such as the China-Africa Institute, the Chinese Academy of Governance, and various provincial training institutes (Sun, 2014).

Another avenue for governance collaboration is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which although primarily infrastructure-oriented, also includes institutional capacity development components. As African countries engage with Chinese contractors and regulatory agencies under BRI, opportunities arise for learning about project management, regulatory compliance, and public sector coordination (Jones & Zeng, 2019).

Technical assistance and knowledge transfer are further enabled through Chinese scholarship programs, think tank exchanges, and South-South cooperation frameworks. Institutions like the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies (SIIS),

the Institute of African Studies at Zhejiang Normal University, and the African Union's Governance Architecture have supported research-based policy dialogues that enrich mutual understanding. Moreover, Chinese technology companies such as Huawei and ZTE have partnered with African governments in building digital governance infrastructure, including national ID systems, surveillance platforms, and e-government services. While these projects raise debates about data sovereignty and digital authoritarianism, they also offer practical lessons on digital transformation in the public sector (Feldstein, 2019).

City-to-city diplomacy and subnational cooperation are also emerging trends. Local governments in China and Africa are exploring sister-city agreements, municipal governance collaborations, and decentralized capacity-building projects. These arrangements allow for more context-specific knowledge exchange, bypassing national-level political constraints (Li, 2020). Despite these efforts, challenges remain. Language barriers, institutional asymmetries, differences in political culture, and lack of standardized evaluation metrics hinder the efficacy of governance cooperation. To enhance impact, there is a need for structured monitoring and evaluation systems, multi-stakeholder involvement (including civil society), and more transparent governance outcomes. The architecture of China-Africa governance cooperation is growing more sophisticated. To maximize its potential, the focus should shift toward co-creation of knowledge, localization of best practices, and inclusive, evidence-based policymaking frameworks that respect the agency and sovereignty of African partners.

Comparative Governance Lessons and Areas of Convergence

The governance experiences of China and Africa, while divergent in history, structure, and ideology, offer fertile ground for comparative learning grounded in mutual respect, non-hegemonic exchange, and context-sensitive application. Rather than seeking to transplant one model onto another, experience sharing must be guided by an understanding of comparative advantages, developmental priorities, and the socio-political realities that shape governance choices in both regions. One key lesson from China's governance model is the value of long-term strategic planning embedded in state institutions. China's consistent use of Five-Year Plans, linked to performance-based evaluations and technocratic planning, has enabled continuity in development policies. African countries, often encumbered by short-term electoral cycles and unstable political transitions, can draw inspiration from this model by strengthening national development plans through legislative backing and institutional insulation from political volatility. China's emphasis on bureaucratic meritocracy—albeit within an undemocratic context—highlights the importance of professionalizing public administration. African reforms toward civil service capacity building, public sector digitalization, and local government empowerment can benefit from adapting China's cadre training methods, performance metrics, and decentralized experimentation. However, such adaptation must remain committed to democratic accountability and human rights.

Digital governance represents another area of potential convergence. China's deployment of smart technologies to enhance administrative efficiency and citizen service delivery resonates with African innovations in e-governance, such as Kenya's Huduma Centres and Nigeria's BVN system. Collaborative initiatives focused on digital infrastructure, cybersecurity, e-governance architecture, and data governance

could enrich Africa's digital modernization pathways while cautioning against authoritarian overreach. Both China and Africa face similar governance challenges, including regional disparities, corruption, and the need to balance state control with market dynamics. China's anti-corruption strategies—such as its internal CCP disciplinary mechanisms and prosecutorial campaigns—offer instructive, albeit controversial, lessons on institutional deterrence and leadership accountability. African states can draw on these experiences to strengthen anti-corruption agencies, enhance whistleblower protection, and promote transparency mechanisms suitable for their democratic and legal frameworks.

A notable area of convergence is the growing emphasis on state-led development. China's success in directing economic modernization through active state participation challenges the orthodoxies of minimal state intervention promoted during the era of structural adjustment. Many African countries are now revisiting industrial policy, agricultural modernization, and state-owned enterprises as tools for inclusive growth. Experience sharing in this domain can focus on policy design, public-private partnerships, investment coordination, and infrastructural development strategies. Equally important is mutual learning around social governance—the management of public goods, civic participation, and conflict mediation. African traditions of consensus-building, communal land management, and participatory dispute resolution can inform China's approaches to rural governance and ethnic integration. Conversely, China's community-level social service models and urban neighborhood committees can offer practical insights for managing service delivery in African urban settings.

However, the ultimate lesson lies in the acknowledgment of governance diversity. The modernization journeys of both China and African countries underline the fallacy of singular development paths. Experience sharing must prioritize contextual relevance, policy experimentation, and reciprocal learning over ideological export. A horizontal exchange framework, supported by think tanks, academic institutions, and joint pilot programs, can ensure that engagement is reflective, grounded, and co-owned. Therefore, comparative governance learning between China and Africa holds immense promise if anchored in realism, mutuality, and respect for sovereignty. Rather than a blueprint, China provides a toolkit—one that African countries can selectively and strategically apply to suit their developmental trajectories and governance aspirations.

Policy Recommendations and Implementation Strategies

To enhance China-Africa experience sharing on governance and modernization, a strategic, multidimensional, and participatory approach is required. This section outlines actionable policy recommendations and pragmatic strategies to institutionalize and operationalize governance cooperation between China and African states.

Institutionalize Structured Dialogue Mechanisms

- i. Establish a China-Africa Governance Forum under the FOCAC umbrella as a standing platform for high-level policy dialogue, co-chaired by representatives from the African Union and China's State Council. This forum should meet biennially and focus on governance innovation, public sector reform, and inclusive development.

- ii. Create National Focal Points within African ministries of governance or public service and China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs to coordinate bilateral knowledge-sharing initiatives, track outcomes, and ensure follow-up on joint declarations.

Develop Joint Centers of Excellence

- i. Establish China-Africa Governance Innovation Hubs in African regional blocs (e.g., ECOWAS, SADC, EAC), jointly funded by African governments and Chinese development finance institutions. These hubs should host research programs, leadership fellowships, and civil service exchange programs.
- ii. Facilitate faculty exchange and joint curricula development between leading African public administration schools and Chinese institutions such as the China National School of Administration and Zhejiang Normal University's Institute of African Studies.

Promote South-South Knowledge Transfer

- i. Launch a "Governance in Practice" Case Study Series, jointly authored by African and Chinese scholars and practitioners, highlighting real-world experiences in civil service reform, anti-corruption, urban governance, and rural development.
- ii. Develop a China-Africa Digital Governance Toolkit, drawing from Chinese and African ICT-led innovations to guide the deployment of e-governance, digital ID systems, mobile service delivery, and public sector automation.

Enhance Civil Service Capacity and Policy Experimentation

- i. Establish Secondment Programs where mid-career civil servants from African countries are embedded in Chinese ministries or state-owned enterprises (and vice versa) for 6–12 months, focusing on strategic planning, regulatory oversight, and service delivery innovation.
- ii. Support pilot projects in policy experimentation through seed grants administered by the China-Africa Development Fund. These should target sectors such as land reform, community policing, urban resilience, and youth employment, with localized indicators and adaptive feedback loops.

Embed Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) Systems

- i. Integrate impact assessment frameworks into all China-Africa governance cooperation projects, emphasizing learning outcomes, gender sensitivity, and local stakeholder participation.
- ii. Create an independent MEL advisory board, composed of African and Chinese academics, civil society representatives, and regional governance experts, to oversee transparency, review progress, and propose mid-course corrections.

Safeguard Democratic Norms and Data Governance

- i. Ensure that experience sharing, especially in digital governance, adheres to international human rights standards and data protection laws. African countries should maintain sovereign control over digital infrastructure while engaging Chinese technology providers.

- ii. Encourage multi-stakeholder consultations involving parliaments, civil society organizations, and the private sector to domesticate and adapt Chinese models without undermining local democratic accountability mechanisms.

Leverage Multilateral and Subnational Platforms

- i. Promote tripartite cooperation models involving China, African states, and multilateral organizations such as the UNDP, OECD, and African Development Bank to scale governance innovations and mobilize financing.
- ii. Encourage city-to-city partnerships to share best practices in urban management, climate resilience, and municipal finance, thereby diffusing governance innovations at the subnational level.

Foster Youth Engagement and Public Awareness

- i. Launch a China-Africa Youth Governance Fellowship, offering opportunities for young professionals to engage in collaborative research, field projects, and policy design labs on topics related to governance and modernization.
- ii. Support media and cultural exchanges that disseminate knowledge of governance practices in both regions through documentaries, blogs, and interactive platforms.

Translating China-Africa governance cooperation into tangible modernization outcomes requires a shift from ad hoc engagement to long-term strategic programming. Institutional capacity, political will, mutual learning, and adaptive implementation are the cornerstones of a sustainable governance partnership that can support Africa's development goals and enrich China's global engagement posture.

Recommendations and Implementation Strategies

To harness the full potential of China-Africa experience sharing on governance in the quest for modernization, strategic recommendations and actionable implementation mechanisms are critical. These should be designed to ensure mutual benefit, contextual relevance, and sustainability.

1. **Institutionalize Knowledge Exchange Mechanisms:** Establish permanent platforms such as China-Africa Governance Learning Hubs within universities and public administration institutes. These hubs should serve as centers for comparative research, policy dialogue, practitioner training, and pilot project incubation.
2. **Co-Develop Tailored Capacity-Building Programs:** Move from generic training modules to co-designed curricula that reflect African governance priorities. Joint task forces should identify skills gaps in areas such as digital transformation, infrastructure regulation, and anti-corruption enforcement, leading to bespoke training programs delivered both online and in-country.
3. **Launch Joint Policy Labs and Pilot Projects:** Encourage bilateral and multilateral experimentation through policy labs co-managed by Chinese and African institutions. These labs can test policy innovations in real-world settings and evaluate their adaptability and scalability. Pilot areas might include smart city governance, public finance management, or community health systems.

4. Create a China-Africa Governance Fellowship Program: Design a bi-directional fellowship scheme that allows African public servants, researchers, and civil society leaders to spend time in Chinese institutions and vice versa. The program should emphasize knowledge co-creation, institutional immersion, and follow-up implementation back home.
5. Promote Peer-to-Peer City Governance Networks: Support decentralized diplomacy by connecting Chinese and African cities through structured networks focused on urban governance challenges. Peer-learning clusters could be formed around themes such as waste management, transportation, or informal settlement upgrading.
6. Strengthen Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) Frameworks: Incorporate robust MEL components into all governance cooperation initiatives to track outcomes, identify best-fit practices, and foster adaptive learning. Independent evaluation units can work alongside project teams to ensure objectivity and continuous improvement.
7. Encourage Triangular Cooperation with Global Institutions: Foster partnerships that include international organizations (e.g., UNDP, OECD, AfDB) to provide technical expertise, co-financing, and global benchmarking support. Such arrangements can strengthen institutional credibility and enhance knowledge diversification.
8. Codify Principles of Ethical Engagement: Develop a governance cooperation charter that articulates shared values including mutual respect, sovereignty, transparency, accountability, and non-coercive partnership. This charter can act as a safeguard against exploitative or ideologically driven engagements.
9. Develop Context-Aware Digital Governance Strategies: Jointly design digital governance frameworks that align with Africa's data sovereignty goals, digital infrastructure readiness, and socio-political realities. Special emphasis should be placed on cybersecurity, digital rights, and inclusive access to technology.
10. Support Inclusive Multi-Stakeholder Dialogues: Ensure the active participation of civil society organizations, academia, private sector actors, and marginalized communities in governance exchanges. Broad stakeholder engagement enhances legitimacy, enriches knowledge, and strengthens accountability mechanisms.

By adopting these strategies, China-Africa governance cooperation can evolve from transactional interactions into transformational partnerships—supporting both regions in navigating complex modernization paths while safeguarding their unique identities and sovereign choices.

Prospects for the Future of China-Africa Governance Exchange

The future of China-Africa governance exchange is bright, contingent on the willingness of both sides to institutionalize the gains made, adapt to global shifts, and deepen mutual respect. Several promising trends and prospects can be leveraged for advancing shared modernization goals:

1. Strategic Alignment of Modernization Blueprints

With the African Union's Agenda 2063 and China's 2035 Vision for Socialist Modernization, both regions share overlapping priorities in digital transformation, inclusive development, ecological governance, and innovation-driven growth. These serve as strategic anchors for governance exchange.

Prospect: Increased integration of governance cooperation into joint planning frameworks, resulting in harmonized objectives and long-term collaborative projects.

2. Rise of South-South Cooperation Models

The decline of Western hegemony and the repositioning of the global South have created more space for alternative governance paradigms. China-Africa experience sharing offers a compelling model of mutual learning based on sovereignty, non-interference, and pragmatism.

Prospect: The China-Africa partnership could emerge as the global reference point for South-South public sector cooperation, offering new governance architectures to the Global South.

3. Youthful Populations and Innovation-Driven Governance

Africa's demographic dividend and China's rising focus on innovation position both sides to harness youth-led governance transformation. With the right platforms, young professionals, civil society leaders, and tech entrepreneurs can become change agents in the governance agenda.

Prospect: Youth-focused China-Africa digital governance programs and innovation hubs can incubate the next generation of public service solutions.

4. Global Crises as Catalysts for Reform

Challenges such as pandemics, climate change, and food insecurity have shown the importance of agile and accountable governance systems. China's crisis management experiences and Africa's local resilience mechanisms can form a complementary learning pool.

Prospect: Joint scenario planning, early warning systems, and resilient governance toolkits will likely become core pillars of future cooperation.

5. Multipolar Global Order and Institutional Reforms

The evolution of a multipolar world allows China and African countries to champion institutional reforms at the global level, including within the United Nations, IMF, World Bank, and WTO.

Prospect: China and Africa may align their diplomatic engagements to push for greater inclusivity, equity, and representation in global governance institutions, creating space for alternative modernization narratives.

Conclusion

China-Africa experience sharing on governance is not merely a diplomatic endeavor; it is a transformative process with the potential to reshape how nations across the Global South pursue development and modernization. As Africa confronts the complexities of post-colonial governance, institutional fragmentation, and persistent inequality, and as China consolidates its governance innovations and global influence, the convergence of both paths presents a timely opportunity.

This article has examined the theoretical underpinnings, historical evolution, contemporary practices, challenges, and future prospects of China-Africa governance cooperation. Through policy recommendations and implementation strategies, it

offers a roadmap for transitioning from episodic exchange to deep, systemic collaboration.

The China-Africa partnership must now move beyond rhetoric to results—where learning is mutual, adaptation is localized, and governance reform is citizen-centered. Whether it is digital governance, state capacity building, or participatory development, the key to sustained impact lies in co-creation, institutional commitment, and visionary leadership.

In a world marked by volatility and shifting global paradigms, the enduring value of China-Africa governance exchange will depend on its ability to deliver inclusive, resilient, and accountable modernization pathways. If managed strategically, it could offer a new model for governance and modernization that resonates across the Global South, inspiring a future where development is not dictated but democratically determined.

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