

New Geopolitics of Higher Education and China-Africa Spatial Imaginaries: Towards Partnership Beyond (De)coloniality

Zhongyu (Krystal) Wang¹, Mo Xu²

¹University of Oxford, Oxford, United Kingdom. ²Beijing Foreign Studies University, Beijing, China

Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

The 1955 Bandung Conference initiated an anti-colonial alliance based on “solidarity, reciprocity, and equality”, foundational to contemporary South-South development cooperation. Revisiting Bandung’s principles, this research critically examines China-Africa higher education cooperation, exploring how university partnership spaces are shaped by geopolitical dynamics beyond simplistic (de)colonial binary. Guided by Marginson’s geo-cognitive spatial framework, it investigates China-Africa spatial imaginaries in higher education through the interconnected dimensions of “material, imaginative, and social practice” space-making. Applying Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis to policy, institutional, and media documents, it reveals how agentic space-making in higher education reflects geopolitical interests while fostering epistemic communities transcending territorial boundaries. Challenging polemical discourses on China-Africa relations, it provides empirical insights into how higher education spaces are negotiated by Chinese and African partners despite material disparities, informing equitable models for Global South development. Future research could explore nuanced analyses of human agency in reshaping institutional spaces, building on this discursive discussion.

Full paper

Introduction

In 1955, the Bandung Conference marked the inception of the Global South as a collective geopolitical force, with Asian and African state leaders first convening independently of colonial powers, explicitly announcing an anti-colonial alliance that seeks common ground and independent development (Zeng, 2024; Phillips, 2016). Against this background, China began building diplomatic ties with African countries through development cooperation, with higher education playing a pivotal role in promoting knowledge, cultural, and people-to-people exchanges (Niu and Liu, 2016). Seven decades since the historical moment, we

proposed this research as a critical attempt to revisit Bandung's legacy of "solidarity, reciprocity, and equality" by examining China-Africa higher education cooperation as contemporary praxis.

While Western scholarship critiques China-Africa cooperation as neo-colonialism by focusing on natural resource extraction, trade agreements, and infrastructure construction, China foregrounds educational assistance to Africa, emphasizing the discourse of "mutual learning, experience sharing, and equal partnership" to distinguish its development approach from the exploitative North-South model. However, such knowledge diplomacy is often problematized as "cultural imperialism" due to funding disparities and power imbalance within China-Africa higher education partnerships (Benabdallah, 2020). Moving beyond the ideologically charged debate, this research explores how higher education interacts with the complexity of geopolitics in shaping spatial imaginaries that transcend physical territories, where epistemic communities emerge across borders to challenge "polarized political possibilities of complicity or resistance" (Levander & Mignolo, 2011, p.10).

Research Questions

To investigate how higher education partnership spaces between China and Africa are shaped by wider geopolitics of the Global South, this research addresses three specific questions: 1) What spatial imaginaries emerge from China-Africa higher education partnerships? 2) How do these spatial imaginaries travel across institutional contexts in China and Africa? 3) How does partnership space-making in higher education negotiate geopolitical dynamics within and beyond China-Africa relations?

Conceptual Framework

We adopt Marginson's (2022) geo-cognitive spatial framework to unpack partnership space-making, viewing spaces as fluid and ever-changing, rather than static fixed structures. This framework operationalizes spatial theories for higher education studies, enabling us to examine material spaces (e.g. infrastructure, financial resources, government policies), imaginative spaces (e.g. political rhetorics, local narratives, public perspectives), and social practice spaces (e.g. research collaboration, knowledge exchange, emerging mechanisms).

Our critical geopolitical insights are informed by Moscovitz and Sabzalieva's (2023) conceptualization of "new" geopolitics of higher education. To develop a renewed power analysis, we discuss not only how higher education policies and practices are influenced by geopolitical currents, but also how international higher education partnership itself functions as a geopolitical machinery, simultaneously reproducing global inequalities and producing new spaces characterized by "relationality and coexisting heterogeneity" (Massey, 2003, p.9).

Methodology

Based on Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis, our methodological approach involves three interconnected stages. First, textual analysis helps identify key linguistic patterns, metaphors, and representations that construct partnership identities. Second, intertextual analysis allows us to trace how discourses circulate between Chinese and African institutions and how they transform across contexts. Furthermore, we conduct contextual analysis to situate these discourses within broader geopolitical relations, showing how texts sustain or challenge power dynamics underlying institutional partnerships. Through this multi-layered analysis, we aim to map out the discursive construction of spatial imaginaries and their material manifestations.

Having compiled a substantial collection of documents, we are currently undertaking a pilot of the three-stage analysis, which informs ongoing data collection. Data sources include China's Africa Policy Papers, Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) Action Plans, African Union's education strategies, institutional agreements and reports, leadership speeches, media coverage, among other documentation of higher education partnerships from both Chinese and African contexts. All the documents are publicly accessible online, collected from government websites, university websites, and official media outlets.

Aims and Significance

Challenging polemical scholarly discourses on whether China-Africa educational cooperation is decolonial or neo-colonial in nature, this research contributes to critical higher education studies with detailed empirical insights into how international partnership spaces are reimagined and co-created in ways that fulfill geopolitical interests on both sides. By contextualizing higher education discussions in the geopolitical construction of the Global South, we anticipate that our findings will inform policy and practice in South-South development cooperation, centering higher education's role in fostering epistemic diversity and justice that potentially counteract asymmetrical material realities between contexts, such as China and Africa. With political discourse underpinning our methodology, we focus on agentic space-making at nation-state and institutional levels, laying an empirical foundation for future research to develop nuanced understandings of human agents as "space-makers" to navigate and reshape China-Africa higher education cooperation and Global South partnerships broadly.