

# **African Studies in the UK and Europe: Lessons for China and the UK?<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Early and new foundations on Africa in UK and China**

45 years ago, in 1962, the Centre of African Studies in the University of Edinburgh was established, and was formally opened in January 1963 by Lord Hailey, author of the famous *African Survey* (Little and Ruel 1963).<sup>3</sup> A year earlier in July 1961, on the instruction of Chairman Mao Zedong, the Institute of Asian and African Studies was established in Beijing.<sup>4</sup> Today, 1<sup>st</sup> September 2007, the Institute of African Studies is being formally opened in Zhejiang Normal University, and just two years ago, the African Studies Centre was formally opened in the University of Oxford.

I put these dates together to remind us that the study of Africa in China and in the UK (as well as in Japan and the US) has very long roots, but it is also being constantly replanted to fit new demands and developments. Long before the Centre was formally started in Edinburgh, there had been important Edinburgh connections to Africa, including the attendance of students such as Julius Nyerere in Edinburgh from 1948 to 1951 (Little, 1962). And a full century earlier, in the 1850s, James Africanus Horton, from Sierra Leone, studied medicine in Edinburgh before going to work and write in West Africa. Similarly, ZNU has been receiving students from Africa long before this year, and indeed members of its staff have been visiting and researching Africa for more than 20 years before 2007.

The establishment of new Centres or Institutes of African Studies in China and the UK is a commentary on the urgency of the need to institutionalise our understandings of Africa, given the constantly changing politics, policies and research priorities.

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<sup>2</sup> Kenneth King began teaching in Ethiopia in 1962, the same year that the Centre of African Studies (CAS) opened in Edinburgh. He returned to Edinburgh in 1965 to start his doctorate, in close connection with the new Centre. After teaching in the University of Nairobi from 1968 to 1971, he returned once more to become a teaching member of the CAS in 1972, and he was the Director of the Centre for 20 years till September 2005.

<sup>3</sup> The Centre of West African Studies in Birmingham was started later the same year, and the Centre of African Studies in the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) was started in 1965.

<sup>4</sup> Intriguingly, the Japan Association for African Studies was started in April 1964. And the African Studies Association (of USA) was founded 50 years ago in April 1957. Even earlier, the Moscow Institute of Asian and African Studies was founded in 1956. The Nordic Africa Institute, supported by Sweden, Denmark and Norway, was founded in Uppsala in Sweden in 1962.

Within the university communities of China and UK such initiatives are doubtless also part of the search for institutional differentiation and for market share.

In this present brief review I shall not attempt to synthesise the outpouring of material over the years on the rise and fall and rise again of African Studies in the UK and in Europe. Rather, I shall attempt a personal account of what African Studies has meant to me, who have been attached to a Centre of African Studies most of my academic life; and what I have learnt over this past year of being a Distinguished Visiting Professor in China, at the University of Hong Kong, during which time I have sought to understand China's re-emerging engagement with Africa. What is it that we Africanists in Europe can share with our colleagues in China, and what, in turn, can we learn from them in their own long-term engagement with the continent??

### **Pessimism and dynamism about African Studies.**

It has been fashionable in recent years in the UK and in USA to comment on the crisis in African Studies.<sup>5</sup> But it is difficult for me fully to understand this pessimism. There have for instance never been more doctoral students working on Africa in Edinburgh University than in recent years. There have never been more members of the Royal African Society (of the UK), founded in 1901, than today, when there are 991. The same is true of African Studies in Japan where there were in May 2007, 886 members.<sup>6</sup> And in the US this year there are no less than 2200 individual and institutional members of the African Studies Association. The story of rapid growth is the same for continental Europe. There the Africa-Europe Group for Interdisciplinary Studies (AEGIS) was only set up in 1991, but it already has 19 institutional members drawn from ten different European centres of African Studies, from Lisbon to Edinburgh, and from Naples to Uppsala. It has just had its second European Conference on African Studies and this brought some 90 different panels together in the African Studies Centre in Leiden.

As part of the documentation for the Leiden Conference the Library in the African Studies Centre in Holland assembled a marvellous inventory of African resources, under three headings:<sup>7</sup>

1. [African Studies: General Issues](#)
2. [African Studies: Country Perspectives](#)
3. [Selected web resources](#)

It is an extraordinarily rich data base, and under 'country perspectives' in particular it includes reviews of India and Africa; African Studies in China (Li Anshan, 2005); African Studies in Portugal; in Russia; in Prague; in the Netherlands; in the West Indies; in Germany; in the United States; in France; and in UK – to mention just a few.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example leading articles by John Lonsdale (2005) and Colin Bundy (2002). See also Kitching (2000) 'Why I gave up African Studies'.

<sup>6</sup> I am grateful to my former student, now professor, Nobu Sawamura of Hiroshima University for this latest update.

<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.ascleiden.nl/Library/Webdossiers/AfricanStudies.aspx>, downloaded 31<sup>st</sup> August 2007 for this resource.

<sup>8</sup> It doesn't however refer to the *Directory of expertise on Africa in Scottish universities* (2005): [www.ed.ac.uk/~direct/menu.htm](http://www.ed.ac.uk/~direct/menu.htm)

### **The coverage of African Studies in the UK**

Richard Hodder-Williams (1996) has regularly reviewed through his directories of Africanists in the UK the geographical coverage of Africanist scholarship in the UK, and although a new, web-based edition of this important directory is under construction, his 1996 *Directory* still affords an invaluable insight into the particular character of UK's African Studies. It will not surprise scholars of Africa present here today that Britain's human resources on Africa cover the following countries in greatest depth: Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Very much less attention is given, though it is still significant, to Botswana, Sierra Leone, Malawi, Swaziland, Lesotho, Namibia, The Gambia, Mozambique and Sudan. Of countries that don't have a connection to the UK, historically or currently through the Commonwealth, only Ethiopia gets the same attention as this second group of countries. All the other countries, Francophone, Lusophone and North African received minimal attention from the main group of British Africanists. This is the first comment on how China's Africanist community might differ from UK's: in China, there would not be this polarization towards a particular set of preferred focus countries. Indeed, it is evident in the presence here in Zhejiang Normal of a group of some 50 African scholars and practitioners who have been attending this launch seminar. They come from no less than 24 countries, and no less than 33 of the participants are from Francophone countries.

What disciplines are covered in the mainstream of African Studies in the UK? Again, like its country coverage, there is a group of key disciplines and a second group which has much less attention. By far the largest number of Africanists cluster in just five subjects: Anthropology, Geography, History, Politics and Sociology. And a smaller but still significant number can be found in Agriculture, Business Studies, Development Studies, Economic and Social History, Economics, Education, Environmental Studies, Language, Law, Literature, Medicine, Theology and Veterinary Science. It will be interesting to know if this concentration will prove to be rather different in China. It will be noticeable that with the exception of Veterinary Science and Agriculture there is little coverage of the sciences in the UK Directory. This is largely because scientists don't see themselves as Africanists but rather as Geologists who happen to work in Africa and Asia. The same is true of several other disciplines, including Education.<sup>9</sup>

### **Educationists as Africanists?**

It is intriguing to see that Zhejiang Normal intends for Education to be one of the three core disciplines in its new Institute of African Studies. This is certainly different from African Studies in UK or in continental Europe. With the exception of the Centre of African Studies in Edinburgh University there is virtually no centre in Europe that has included the formal study and research on education in Africa as one of their core disciplines. By contrast, education has been identified by the Ministry of Education in China as a key area for the identification of resource centres on education for Africa. So far only one of these resource centres (ZNU) has chosen to develop further its profile and become a full-fledged Institute for the study and for research on education in Africa. But it will be very valuable to see what kind of

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<sup>9</sup> There are a good number of references to Education specialists as Africanists in the Directory, but this is largely because there was a concerted effort to get them to acknowledge their geographical area of specialisation.

research the new Institute undertakes. Preliminary indications are that its current work on higher education in different countries of Africa (South Africa, Nigeria, Cameroon etc) is aimed at listening to and understanding the challenges of higher education in Africa.

### **African Studies as understanding or as telling?**

It is of course far too early to guess what will be the character of the African Studies associated with Zhejiang Normal. But on the basis of knowing just a little about those most closely involved in this launch, I would not be surprised if the Institute avoided being very judgmental about Africa. The tendency to make value judgments about Africa is central to much of the Western discourse on Africa, not just from academics but also from the aid policy community and from the NGOs. Whether you check out the website of Oxfam,<sup>10</sup> or DFID's website on China,<sup>11</sup> or even the Royal African Society (RAS),<sup>12</sup> you will find a great deal of critical judgment about policy on Africa, and about African policy.

Thus on the home-page of the RAS, the main article today is about how US assistance to Africa is misaligned. Another key article is about what Gordon Brown should consider changing in Britain's Africa policy. And embedded in this article are some intriguingly sharp judgments about what the Director of the RAS thinks about China in Africa:

And Africa has a new partner – China. China's hunger for Africa's resources has driven up their prices, providing more income for many African countries than all the promised aid. The Chinese are also willing to provide stadia, roads, and presidential palaces, which African governments tend to prefer to schools, clinics and lectures about governance and corruption. China's non-interference policy is tolerant of bad governance in Africa. As Donald Kaberuka, President of the African Development Bank, says: "It is Africans who should define what they want to get from this relationship (with China)." The fear is that China's engagement in Africa will allow African governments to enjoy quick winnings and avoid making the longer term investments and commitments needed for sustainable development.<sup>13</sup>

Also on the home page of the RAS, there is a strong article on whether China is changing Africa or Africa is changing China (Alden, 2007a).<sup>14</sup> The core of article, again, is a set of judgments about China's behaviour in Africa. The flavour of these (and doubtless of Alden's book (2007b) which is advertised on the home-page) can be captured in the following excerpt:

China's 'no conditions' foreign policy has in short order won it friends of all political stripes across a region long weary of being preached to by earnest Westerners and, in so doing, threatened to dislodge a carefully crafted

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<sup>10</sup> [http://www.oxfam.org.uk/oxfam\\_in\\_action/issues/education.html](http://www.oxfam.org.uk/oxfam_in_action/issues/education.html)

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.dfid.gov.uk/countries/asia/china.asp>. This site mentions that 135 million live on less than \$1/day in China, and 500 million on less than \$2/day.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.royalafricansociety.org/>

<sup>13</sup> [http://www.royalafricansociety.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=397](http://www.royalafricansociety.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=397), downloaded 1<sup>st</sup> September 2007

<sup>14</sup> [http://www.royalafricansociety.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=412](http://www.royalafricansociety.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=412)

governance and transparency agenda. With easy credit seemingly available to all takers, there is a rush by African heads of state to attract the Chinese package of soft loans, investment capital and technical expertise to their countries and a concomitant reluctance to take up traditional Western-backed development finance with its 'conditionalities'. The result, so they say, is that responsible African governments, alongside their more notorious confreres in pariah states, are being tempted away from introducing policies that embed accountability in everyday practice in favour of the 'no strings attached' loans from Beijing.

By contrast, the seminar that is accompanying the launch of this Institute of African Studies in ZNU illustrates something of the apparent difference between Western Africanist approaches and China's. The title of the seminar is 'Higher education administration for African countries'. In a Western setting, this seminar would include a great deal of analysis by Western analysts of the weaknesses of higher education management and governance in Africa. Intriguingly, this launch seminar so far has been entirely concerned with the analysis of China's higher education system. It is left to the African participants themselves to determine what they consider might be the implications for their own systems of what they have learnt in China.

It will be interesting to follow what happens to this approach once the faculty and the graduate students are exposed through fieldwork to much more experience of Africa. But it may well be that, in a way that is not dissimilar to Japan, China avoids joining the chorus of Western analysts on what Africa should do to revitalise its universities, or any other aspect of its political and social environment. China's basic assumption about the importance of African agency in African development priorities is a very salutary perspective on many Western commentators.

Such a position, if taken by the Institute of African Studies in ZNU, does not, of course, mean that the Africanists in this university have no views about African higher education, or about African development more generally. But it does mean that they perceive their interaction in this seminar (or in other future settings) not as trainers nor as donors but as facilitators, catalysts and partners.

In Edinburgh, especially in the field of Education, we look forward with great expectation to continued cooperation with this exciting initiative.

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