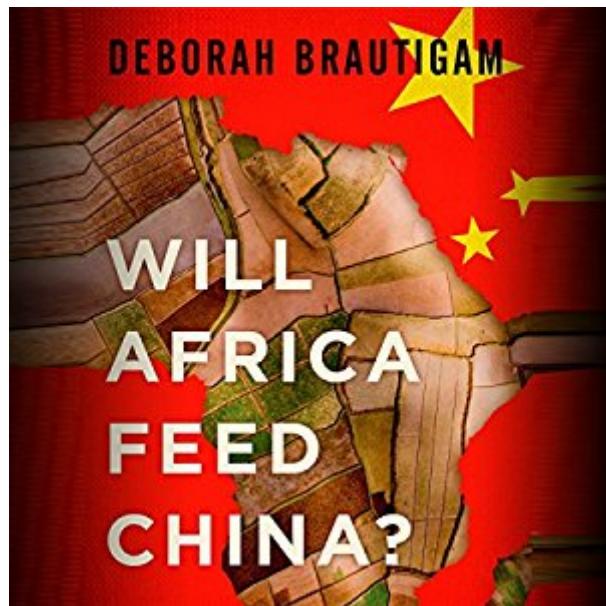


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# Will Africa Feed China?



## Synopsis

Is China building a new empire in rural Africa? Over the past decade, China's meteoric rise on the continent has raised a drumbeat of alarm. China has nine percent of the world's arable land, six percent of its water, and over 20 percent of its people. Africa's savannahs and river basins host the planet's largest expanses of underutilized land and water. Few topics are as controversial and emotionally charged as the belief that the Chinese government is aggressively buying up huge tracts of prime African land to grow food to ship back to China. In *Will Africa Feed China?*, Deborah Brautigam, one of the world's leading experts on China and Africa, probes the myths and realities behind the media headlines. Her careful research challenges the conventional wisdom; as she shows, Chinese farming investments are in fact surprisingly limited, and land acquisitions modest. Defying expectations, China actually exports more food to Africa than it imports. Is this picture likely to change? African governments are pushing hard for foreign capital, and China is building a portfolio of tools to allow its agribusiness firms to "go global". International concerns about "land grabbing" are well-justified. Yet to feed its own growing population, rural Africa must move from subsistence to commercial agriculture. What role will China play? Moving from the halls of power in Beijing to remote irrigated rice paddies of Africa, *Will Africa Feed China?* introduces the people and the politics that will shape the future of this engagement: the state-owned Chinese agribusiness firms that pioneered African farming in the 1960s and the entrepreneurial private investors who followed them. Their fascinating stories, and those of the African farmers and officials who are their counterparts, ground Brautigam's deeply informative, deftly balanced reporting.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

An excellent review of China's agricultural investments in Africa, China creating jobs for Africans in Africa, and China improving the quality of life in Africa.

Great book, tells a different story of China in Africa than you usually hear in the mainstream media.

For quite a few years China's expansionist policy and global ambition has been the subject of many press headlines. The country, it is said, has visions of empire, seeking foreign outposts with the aim of supplying food and other raw materials to satisfy its own growing demand. Africa is one key area, it is claimed, and large chunks of the country have already been sold to Chinese companies. Is this true? Well the author seems to treat such ambitious, intriguing and possibly inflammatory stories with a large degree of scepticism. If the country has been trying to buy up huge tracts of Africa, to employ predominantly Chinese workers who will grow and ship food back, it either has not done such a great job thus far or it has been incredibly successful at hiding its endeavours. Certainly it appears that the author has done her research. All of the claims investigated are supported by extensive sources. There is nothing to suggest that the evidence presented is not correct. Many news reports and claims do get debunked in what appears to be a comprehensive manner. It does seem amazing that so many reports could be so wrong, although as the author notes if a respected news source reports a claim, there is a tendency for it to be echoed around the world as fact. How or why have so many people seemingly got so muddled up, or to use a slightly off-colour British phrase 'earse about face'? The author notes that Chinese farming investments are in fact surprisingly limited and land acquisitions modest; China exports more food to Africa than it imports. African governments are generally desperately seeking foreign investment (no matter what they may say to the domestic audience) and China, like others, has its fair share of pioneering business explorers, yet the limited, tentative steps made so far have hardly been successful or large-scale. What are the motives for those who may be pushing a false agenda? If even the economist of the African Development Bank will author a report claiming China is the biggest land grabber in the world, surely in Africa they should know the real truth? The author seems to be knocking down the claims like pins at a bowling alley. As the author writes: 'The first belief, echoed in the chief economist's statement, is that the Chinese have actually acquired very large areas of farmland in Africa. Many media stories have

featured Chinese companies (or, more commonly, simply “China” or “the Chinese”) as central players in African land acquisitions. Second, it is widely believed that the Chinese government is leading the effort to acquire land in Africa as part of a grand plan, using its state-owned enterprises and sovereign wealth funds. Third, the conventional wisdom holds that the Chinese have developed a voracious appetite for African grain. Finally, many believe that the Chinese have sent (or plan to send) large numbers of their own farmers to settle in the continent. For example, The Economist newspaper repeated (without endorsing) a report that more than a million Chinese farmers were cultivating crops in Africa.<sup>1</sup> The author is adamant “None of the stories above turned out to be true.” China’s policies talk about increasing foreign investment (but so do many other countries) but nothing has been discovered to suggest there is a plan for massive, large-scale investment in land or African agriculture. The author notes “surprisingly few of the Chinese investments headlined in media stories have actually taken place. No one has yet identified a village full of Chinese farmers anywhere on the continent.” For the investments and trials that have taken place, the outcomes have often turned out to be euphemistically described as “problematic”; many myths are circulating as facts, ambitious plans transform to meagre realities and perhaps a lot of hot air has been expended by parties with vested interests to pump matters up. Large, structural and practical problems exist, particularly in African agriculture, that won’t be solved overnight. Some of the investments made are speculative, some come from people with no agricultural background and definitely with no state-provided finance. “Why does Africa import so much food, when it has some of the world’s largest expanses of arable land? The simple answer is technology: Europe’s 18th century agricultural revolution has yet to reach much of rural Africa. With 54 countries, the continent has an enormous variety, and no country’s story is exactly the same as another’s. Yet overall, the statistics are striking. Some 65 per cent of ploughing, cultivating and harvesting operations rely solely on human muscle – no animal traction or machinery. Up to 20 per cent of harvests rot in poor storage or are lost to pests, compared to only two per cent in the United States,” notes the author. It hardly sounds a prime investment opportunity; even with the entire might of the Chinese state possibly lurking in the shadows. How is there so much confusion? The author quite diplomatically states it as “In some cases, a Chinese firm was interested, but the investment still failed to go forward. In others, however, those compiling the databases mistakenly tagged an investment as a Chinese land acquisition when it was actually a company from another country. They labelled an initial statement of interest or a memorandum of understanding as a signed contract, and failed to follow up. There was almost no

investigative reporting on these cases – journalists repeated them, but almost never inquired further. Surprisingly, as we will see, some researchers did go to Africa to investigate the most sensational cases, yet their published research was not picked up by the hundred members of the International Land Coalition, which in April 2012 still included in their database debunked Chinese land acquisitions in Africa totalling nearly 3 million hectares. There's more: More to the point: the Internet is a wonderful tool, but it creates a challenge for those seeking to know the real dimensions of phenomena like foreign land acquisitions in far-away places. As we saw in the case of Mozambique, poorly-checked stories can multiply, with fiction popping up as fact in books and articles by writers who assume, because it appeared in a well-regarded newspaper like The Economist, or The Guardian, or a respected website hosted by a top-ranked think tank, it must be true. Furthermore, we now live in an era of 'big data' and 'killer facts'. In the social sciences, many students learn that as long as they have access to a dataset, they can write dissertations about development without ever visiting a developing country. Of course, this could all be an elaborate cover story, being set up on the orders of Beijing. The balance of probabilities and a cup of strong coffee tend to point in the author's favour, however. To the question 'Have the Chinese acquired large areas of farmland in Africa?' the author answers: 'No' or at least, not yet. If Chinese companies had actually acquired all the land they were alleged to have acquired since 2000, they would have 'grabbed' nearly 6 million hectares, just under one per cent of all of the arable land on the continent. Yet as we have seen, Chinese agribusinesses have actually acquired very little land in Africa. Even including all the farms acquired in the 1990s, and the GMG Global plantations in West Africa, Chinese companies still hold fewer than 250,000 hectares of African land, an area roughly equivalent to twice the size of New York City. Discouraged by poor infrastructure, political instability, and the sober realization that profits were likely to prove more elusive than hoped, Chinese firms came, explored, and then went elsewhere. Will they return? Maybe that depends on the pace and willingness for change in individual countries. This book certainly was an engaging, eye-opening read that appears to throw many buckets of cold water on a narrative that many perhaps want to believe is true, to fit pre-ordained opinions and viewpoints. The reader does not even need to care about African or Chinese politics and agriculture to find this a different, passionate and informative book that could give them literary company for many evenings. The book does not seek to portray China as a total innocent who only wants to focus on its own country, even though it struggles to do that at the best of times presently. It was all really fascinating and whilst it can diminish the reader's 'global-marching'

views of China, it can and does further act as a wake-up call to many African countries to improve their own lot and that of their inhabitants.

When I first heard the question in the title of this book, I thought the answer was obvious: "Of course not!" China fed itself throughout the 20th century, so why would it need Africa's food in the 21st century? China's population has peaked and will decline throughout this century. Therefore, if China managed to feed itself when it had 1.5 billion, why would it need Africa's assistance when it declines to 1.2 billion (and lower)? In short, I didn't see why one needed an entire book to answer such a simple question. The reason we do is that there are plenty who believe otherwise. And it's not just pot-smoking conspiracy theorists who think that China is taking over vast tracts of African land to cultivate rice for the Chinese. The Economist magazine has trumpeted stories to that effect. Indeed, the author meticulously documents all the publications (mainly of them mainstream ones) that assert this China, Inc. narrative. The book systematically destroys this notion that China is taking over Africa's agriculture to feed its people. Carefully researched and painstakingly argued, the author builds a solid case as to why we need to stop fearing this story. At the same time, the book hedges itself. It often says, "There is no evidence for such a takeover . . . at this time." In other words, the author isn't claiming that it will never happen. She's simply explaining that for now there is insufficient evidence to argue that case. So what is China doing in Africa? The book focuses on agriculture and it seems that China is bumbling through many initiatives in Africa. It's tried many programs. And just like Western aid and intervention has often failed, so has Chinese aid and intervention. China will continue playing a role in Africa and that role will increase in all realms, including agriculture. However, it's unlikely that Africa will feed China. Africa can hardly feed itself - it's a net importer of food.

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