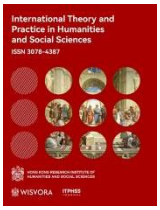
WISVORA

International Theory and Practice in Humanities and Social Sciences
2026 Volume3,Issue3 ISSN 3078-4387



Food Security and Strategic Dependency: China's Political Economy of Agricultural Trade with Africa

Ninfodora Nse Ondo Mbasogo[1*], Angel Ondo Angüe Mete[1]

[1]*Wuhan Textile University, Wuhan, Hubei, China*

Accepted

2026-05-26

Keywords

Sino-African relations; agricultural trade; food security; political economy; strategic dependency; technology transfer; agricultural modernization.

Corresponding Author

Ninfodora Nse Ondo Mbasogo

https://doi.org/10.70693/itphss.v3i3.534

Abstract

This article examines the political economy of agricultural trade between China and Africa. It moves beyond macroeconomic statistics to analyze the human and structural impacts on the ground. It highlights China's pressing food security needs alongside Africa's urgent drive for agricultural modernization. Bilateral trade has grown rapidly over the past decade. It shows strong product complementarity. Yet, it remains highly concentrated in a few specific countries. China relies heavily on this trade to secure a stable food supply for its urbanizing population. Meanwhile, the transfer of Chinese agricultural technology creates complex strategic dependencies for African farming communities. By incorporating qualitative insights, the article addresses infrastructure hurdles, local farmer perspectives, and regional instability. It proposes practical pathways for balanced cooperation. These include market diversification, infrastructure investment, and local value addition. The ultimate goal is to ensure international trade translates into sustainable livelihoods for local populations.

1. Introduction

Agricultural trade between China and Africa represents a highly complex political economy that directly links domestic food security with international dependency (Brautigam, 2015; Jiang, 2020). China urgently seeks to diversify its global supply chains, needing to feed its growing urban centers amidst global market volatility and geopolitical shifts (Zhang, 2019). African nations, conversely, want to modernize their agricultural sectors. They aim to lift rural communities out of poverty, ensure domestic food sovereignty, and increase national export revenue (Pepa & Minoia, 2024). This mutual engagement creates a dynamic and constantly shifting landscape.

However, scholarly analysis must look beyond mere trade volumes and state-level agreements. The relationship involves real power asymmetries, the daily realities of technology transfers, and

the fragile nature of regional stability (Xie & Liu, 2015). At its core, this trade affects the livelihoods of millions of farmers and consumers across two continents. It shapes economic dignity and the future of global food networks, requiring a human-centric approach to international trade policy (Yang & Yang, 2025).

2. The Scale and Structure of Bilateral Trade

The economic partnership demonstrates remarkable growth. China currently stands as Africa's largest trading partner, and agricultural trade forms a vital, growing pillar of this bond (Jiang, 2020; Yang & Yang, 2025). The total trade volume has steadily increased, reflecting a deepening economic reliance on one another (Nse, 2024).

Crucially, the trade balance has recently undergone a historic shift. While China historically maintained an agricultural trade surplus with Africa, the period from 2023 onward marks a transition into a deficit for China (Ma et al., 2025). This reflects Africa's growing export capacity and China's targeted import facilitation policies, such as the "Green Lanes" initiative.

Table 1: Sino-African Agricultural Trade Volume (2020-2025)

Year	Total Trade (USD 100mm)	Imports from Africa	Exports to Africa	Trade Balance
2020	88.63	38.38	50.25	11.87
2021	108.78	48.37	60.41	12.04
2022	104.39	49.09	55.30	6.21
2023	93.50	53.20	40.30	-12.90
2024	102.45	58.15	44.30	-13.85
2025	114.60	66.20	48.40	-17.80

Note: 2024 and 2025 figures incorporate projected estimates based on recent customs trends and FOCAC policy targets.

The trade structure exhibits strong complementarity, though it continues to reflect traditional global economic divides. China primarily imports resource-intensive products from Africa, such as oilseeds, fruits, and nuts (Brautigam, 2015). For example, China has recently increased soybean imports from Benin and Tanzania to reduce its reliance on traditional Western suppliers (Yang & Yang, 2025). Conversely, China exports labor-intensive and processed goods back to Africa, with cotton, aquatic products, and processed condiments dominating these exports (Nse, 2024).

Furthermore, the trade remains highly concentrated. South Africa, Sudan, and Zimbabwe serve as the main exporters to China, while Nigeria and Egypt act as the primary importers of Chinese goods (Ma et al., 2025). This geographic concentration creates structural risks, leaving many smaller, landlocked African nations entirely out of the economic benefits and highly vulnerable to regional supply chain shocks (Xie & Liu, 2015).

3. China’s Food Security Imperative

Food security acts as the primary driver behind China's agricultural strategy. China faces the significant challenge of feeding 1.4 billion people with less than 10% of the world's arable land (Zhang, 2019). Rapid urbanization continues to consume domestic farmland, while climate change threatens domestic crop yields.To manage this pressure, the government champions the "Agriculture Going Out" policy (Brautigam, 2015). Africa presents a natural solution, possessing vast uncultivated land and abundant water resources. African agriculture serves as a strategic frontier for China's long-term food security (Ma et al., 2025).

Through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China essentially builds a "Food Silk Road." This ensures reliable access to essential commodities, insulating the Chinese domestic market from the shocks of global supply chain disruptions (Yang & Yang, 2025).

4. A Qualitative Investigation into Trade Dynamics

Quantitative data only tells part of the story. A qualitative investigation reveals the lived realities of this political economy. Analyzing policy documents and listening to local voices exposes deep structural nuances that macroeconomic numbers often obscure (Pepa & Minoia, 2024).

First, policy discourse analysis shows that these agricultural agreements operate as vital diplomatic tools. China uses agricultural aid to build political goodwill and strengthen international alliances (Jiang, 2020). African leaders, in turn, leverage this foreign aid to fulfill domestic promises of modernization. The recent "Green Lanes" policy serves as a prime example, speeding up customs clearance for African agricultural products (Yang & Yang, 2025). However, the human reality is that this requires African farmers to adopt strict, expensive fumigation technologies to meet Chinese phytosanitary standards—a financial burden many smallholders cannot bear (Nse, 2024).

Second, on-the-ground stakeholder perspectives highlight a much more complex reality. Interviews with African farmers often reveal a double-edged sword. A farmer might use Chinese hybrid seeds and celebrate a massive harvest. However, they soon realize these specific seeds cannot be saved for the next planting season, creating a stressful cycle of financial reliance on foreign chemical fertilizers and seeds (Pepa & Minoia, 2024).

Finally, case studies of Agricultural Technology Demonstration Centers (ATDCs) serve as qualitative microcosms. These centers are designed to share knowledge (Jiang, 2020). Yet, field observations show frequent cultural and practical friction. In places like the Xai-Xai farm in Mozambique, Chinese experts utilize advanced drones and Beidou GPS for pesticide spraying. While this high-tech, capital-intensive model is impressive, it frequently clashes with the traditional, small-scale ecological practices of local communities, leading to poor long-term adoption rates (Pepa & Minoia, 2024).

5. Strategic Dependency and Technological Transfer

This qualitative reality brings us to the critical issue of strategic dependency. China actively exports its agricultural technology to Africa through ATDCs, introducing Chinese seeds, heavy machinery, and modern farming techniques (Jiang, 2020). On the surface, this promises a much-needed increase in productivity and rural income.

However, it introduces a precarious long-term reliance. African agricultural systems slowly

become dependent on Chinese inputs to survive (Nse, 2024). As local farmers abandon traditional practices, they adopt capital-intensive farming models that require constant cash flow. This reflects a deep and growing power asymmetry. While African governments generally welcome these foreign investments to boost national GDP, local seed sovereignty slowly erodes (Pepa & Minoia, 2024). True partnership requires a technology transfer that empowers the local farmer, rather than indebting them to foreign supply chains.

6. The Political Economy of Multilateral Resistance

Even the best trade agreements require stable conditions on the ground. Infrastructure deficits severely hinder the movement of goods, drastically increasing transaction costs for everyone involved (Anderson & Van Wincoop, 2003). For a rural farmer, a poor road is economically devastating; it means watching a hard-earned harvest rot by the roadside because a transport truck simply cannot reach the village in time.

Furthermore, multilateral resistance affects the stability of the entire region. Local governance issues, corruption, and ethnic conflicts create negative spatial spillovers (Xie & Liu, 2015). Instability in one nation quickly disrupts regional supply chains, forcing families to flee their farms and abandon their crops. Climate change acts as a severe threat multiplier here, where unpredictable droughts destroy yields and escalate local tensions. Peace and efficient, transparent government are absolute prerequisites for stable trade (Ma et al., 2025). Chinese investments must navigate these complex, fragile local realities, as top-down policy support from capital cities cannot overcome deep-rooted structural barriers alone (Xie & Liu, 2015).

7. Strategic Pathways for Balanced Cooperation

Policymakers can optimize this trade relationship to better serve both nations and their people. Both regions must actively address the underlying political economy to ensure equitable growth.

• Diversify Markets and Products: Stakeholders should actively expand trade beyond traditional partners. Integrating smaller farming communities into the global market builds regional resilience and protects both sides from sudden geopolitical shocks (Nse, 2024).

• Strengthen Rural Infrastructure: Targeted investments in rural transport and logistics are critical. Connecting remote villages to main arteries lowers costs and prevents post-harvest food waste (Xie & Liu, 2015).

• Enhance Local Value Addition: African nations must process raw commodities locally. Building local processing facilities creates steady jobs, keeps more wealth within the community, and moves African economies up the global value chain (Brautigam, 2015).

• Promote Inclusive Technology: Technology transfer must respect and integrate local knowledge systems. Training must focus on accessible, sustainable methods, ensuring farmers retain control over their own land and resources (Pepa & Minoia, 2024).

• Harmonize Trade Regulations: Reducing tariffs and simplifying border checks facilitates smoother market access. Technical standards must be harmonized further so that small agricultural businesses can thrive alongside massive state-owned enterprises (Yang & Yang, 2025).

8. Conclusion

Sino-African agricultural trade represents a vital strategic nexus. It attempts to balance China's

pressing food security needs with Africa's urgent development goals. The current model shows immense economic potential and has successfully integrated many rural producers into global markets, evidenced by the recent shift toward an African trade surplus in this sector. Yet, qualitative investigations reveal a system that risks creating deep strategic dependencies. Vulnerable farming communities bear the brunt of these structural risks. Acknowledging this political economy is necessary for genuine progress. Balanced cooperation requires structural reforms, inclusive technology sharing, and resilient infrastructure, prioritizing human well-being alongside national economic growth.

References

Anderson, J. E., & Van Wincoop, E. (2003). Gravity with gravitas: A solution to the border puzzle. American Economic Review, 93(1), 170–192. doi.org

Brautigam, D. (2015). Will Africa feed China? Oxford University Press.

Jiang, L. (2020). Beyond official development assistance: Chinese development cooperation and African agriculture. Palgrave Macmillan.Ma, Z., Wang, R., Lin, F., Zhang, Q., & Otumawu-Apreku, K. (2025). Impact of China–Africa agricultural trade on food security: facts and quantitative analysis. Frontiers of Agricultural Science and Engineering, 12(4), 718-728. doi.org

Nse, O. M. N. (2024). Research on the development and problems of Sino-African agricultural products trade [Unpublished bachelor's thesis]. School of International Education.

Pepa, M., & Minoia, P. (2024). China-Africa agricultural cooperation and the promises of modernization.

Palgrave Macmillan.

Xie, J., & Liu, X. (2015). Direct impacts and spatial spillovers: How does the multilateral resistance affect China-Africa agricultural trade? China Finance and Economic Review, 4(4), 95–114.

Yang, L., & Yang, R. (2025). Analysis of China-Africa agricultural cooperation situation. International Relations and Diplomacy, 13(2), 39-49. doi.org

Zhang, H. (2019). Securing the "rice bowl": China and global food security. Palgrave Macmillan.