Open Access Library Journal
2026, Volume 13, e16104
ISSN Online: 2333-9721
ISSN Print: 2333-9705

The Human Centered Meaning of Chinese Modernization and Its Implications for China Africa Cooperation

Wentao Lin

Institute of African Studies, Zhejiang Normal University, Jinhua, China
Email: 13399569588@qq.com

How to cite this paper: Lin, W.T. (2026) The Human Centered Meaning of Chinese Modernization and Its Implications for China Africa Cooperation. *Open Access Library Journal*, **13**: e16104.
https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1116104

Received: September 30, 2026
Accepted: November 17, 2026
Published: November 20, 2026

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Abstract

Chinese modernization is frequently discussed through its economic performance, institutional features, and implications for the changing international order. Yet its normative center is the claim that modernization should serve people's well-being, rely on their participation, and distribute the gains of development more broadly. This article interprets that claim as a human-centered development framework and examines its implications for China-Africa cooperation. It argues that a human-centered perspective does not require abandoning infrastructure, trade, or industrial investment. It requires evaluating those activities by their effects on human capabilities, decent employment, health, education, technological learning, social inclusion, and the capacity of African institutions to sustain development. Chinese modernization contributes a policy logic that links physical investment to people's development, broad sharing of gains, and nationally directed institutional learning; capability theory supplies a standard of real opportunity, while Agenda 2063 supplies African priorities and ownership. Existing research shows that Chinese finance and investment can support growth, employment, education, and health, but effects vary by sector, locality, institutional design, and the agency exercised by African actors. On this basis, the article proposes five priorities for cooperation: linking physical projects to local capability formation; embedding vocational and higher education in African development strategies; expanding health and social-sector partnerships; institutionalizing African participation and co-design; and measuring outcomes at the level of people and communities. Inclusive digital and green transitions cut across all five priorities. The relevance of Chinese modernization to Africa lies in strengthening each society's capacity to pursue an autonomous, inclusive, and sustainable path of modernization.

Subject Areas

Public Policy

Keywords

Chinese Modernization, People-Centered Development, China-Africa Cooperation, Human Capabilities, African Agency, Human Resource Development

1. Introduction

The debate on modernization has long been shaped by a narrow association between development and the expansion of output, industrial capacity, urban infrastructure, and technological power. These achievements matter because they enlarge the material resources available to a society. They do not, however, settle the question of who benefits, who participates, what kinds of lives people can lead, or whether development creates durable capacities beyond a completed project. These questions have become especially important in China-Africa relations. Cooperation has expanded from trade and construction into education, health, digital connectivity, industrial development, scientific research, and professional training. The diversity of these activities makes a people-centered standard of evaluation both possible and necessary.

Chinese modernization offers a relevant conceptual point of departure. Its defining features include modernization of a huge population, common prosperity for all, coordinated material and cultural-ethical advancement, harmony between humanity and nature, and peaceful development [1]. These features present modernization as a comprehensive social process rather than a simple rise in gross domestic product. The people-centered development philosophy further defines development as being for the people, dependent on the people, and shared by the people. The Outline of the 15th Five-Year Plan explicitly calls for combining investment in physical assets with investment in people [2]. Education, vocational skills, employment, health, care, and opportunities for personal development are thus treated as productive foundations of modernization as well as components of well-being.

This orientation has direct relevance to Africa, but it should not be interpreted as a ready-made model for export. African societies differ widely in their demographic structures, political economies, educational systems, languages, labor markets, and national development strategies. The African Union's Agenda 2063 places self-determination and people-driven development at the center of the continent's own vision. Its sixth aspiration calls for development that relies on African people, particularly women and youth [3]. The strongest basis for dialogue is therefore not the replication of Chinese institutions. It is the convergence between a Chinese emphasis on development for and through the people and an African

emphasis on agency, inclusion, and continental transformation.

The argument of this article is that the human-centered meaning of Chinese modernization can deepen China-Africa cooperation by changing the unit of success. A port, railway, industrial park, university partnership, hospital, or digital network should not be judged only by whether it is delivered, financed, or technically operational. It should also be judged by whether it expands people's capabilities, supports decent work, strengthens local institutions, reduces unequal access, transfers usable knowledge, and remains sustainable after external support declines. This does not displace infrastructure or production. It connects them more firmly to human development.

The article makes three contributions. First, it specifies the analytical role of Chinese modernization in a human-centered evaluation of China-Africa cooperation: its policy language links investment in assets to investment in people, treats people as both beneficiaries and participants, and connects shared gains to nationally directed development. Capability theory provides the criterion of substantive opportunity, while Agenda 2063 identifies African goals and political ownership; neither alone specifies how this Chinese policy logic should be assessed in bilateral projects. Second, the article examines existing evidence on employment, education, health, and knowledge transfer without treating aggregate benefits as sufficient proof of local inclusion. Third, it translates the combined perspective into four project tests and five practical priorities that make trade-offs, participation, and institutional autonomy explicit. The analysis synthesizes policy documents and peer-reviewed research and does not claim a new causal estimate.

2. Human Centered Development as an Analytical Framework

Human-centered development can be approached from two related but distinct traditions. Human capital theory emphasizes the productive value of education, health, knowledge, and skills. Schultz's [4] classic formulation challenged the treatment of expenditure on people as mere consumption and showed that acquired abilities are a form of investment. This insight remains important for countries seeking structural transformation. Industrialization, digitalization, and technological upgrading cannot be sustained without technicians, managers, health professionals, teachers, researchers, and workers capable of adapting to changing forms of production.

A human capital approach can nevertheless become too instrumental if people are valued only for their contribution to productivity. Capability theory broadens the standard. It asks what people are substantively able to do and to become. Nussbaum [5], building on Sen's work, argues that development and justice should be assessed in terms of real opportunities rather than resources alone. Education matters because it raises productivity, but also because it expands judgment, voice, mobility, and personal choice. Health is economically valuable, but it is also constitutive of a dignified life. Employment matters not only as a source of income,

but also through security, rights, learning, and social participation.

The four tests translate these distinct sources into a project-level decision rule. Capability theory asks whether people gain real opportunities; Agenda 2063 defines development priorities through African ownership; Chinese modernization adds a policy logic for connecting physical and human investment, broad sharing, participation, and independent development within one modernization strategy. For China-Africa cooperation, a project is human-centered when it meets four tests. First, it produces capabilities that people and institutions can continue to use. Second, intended beneficiaries participate meaningfully in defining needs and evaluating results. Third, benefits are accessible across social groups and territories rather than captured by a narrow set of actors. Fourth, the project strengthens the long-term autonomy of the partner country instead of creating avoidable technological, financial, or organizational dependence. These tests are jointly relevant: gains under one test do not automatically compensate for serious harm under another.

Consider an industrial park that creates local jobs but relies on a financing arrangement that increases public debt and leaves community representatives with no influence over land use. Employment gains satisfy part of the capability test, but the autonomy and participation tests reveal material costs. The partners should compare financing and design alternatives, disclose the trade-offs, and require affected groups' informed input before approval. If debt risks or loss of community control cannot be brought within locally agreed safeguards, projected jobs alone should not justify the original design.

This framework also prevents a false opposition between physical and human investment. Roads can expand access to schools, hospitals, markets, and employment. Electricity can support clinics, digital education, manufacturing, and household welfare. Telecommunications can connect remote communities and widen access to services. Physical infrastructure becomes human-centered when it is designed around these outcomes and supported by the skills, maintenance systems, public institutions, and local enterprises required to keep producing them. Conversely, training programs are unlikely to generate lasting benefits when graduates lack equipment, jobs, institutional support, or pathways to apply what they have learned. The analytical task is therefore to examine the relationship between assets, institutions, and human capabilities.

3. The Human Centered Meaning of Chinese Modernization

3.1. People as the Purpose and Agents of Modernization

The first human-centered feature of Chinese modernization is its definition of development's purpose. Official formulations identify the people's aspiration for a better life as the enduring objective of modernization [1]. This language places public well-being, rather than aggregate expansion alone, at the center of the development process. The emphasis on common prosperity reinforces the distributive dimension. Modernization is considered incomplete when growth produces severe polarization or when basic services and opportunities remain inaccessible

to large parts of the population.

The people-centered principle also concerns agency. Development is not presented simply as something delivered to passive recipients. The formulation that development should rely on the people recognizes labor, knowledge, entrepreneurship, community initiative, and public participation as forces of modernization. He and Wang [6] interpret this orientation as a defining distinction between a people-centered socialist modernization and capital-centered development. Their argument is normative and should not be treated as proof that every policy automatically achieves the stated goal. It does, however, clarify the criterion by which policies claim legitimacy: material progress must improve people's lives and enable wider participation in development.

Applied internationally, this point carries an important implication. Human-centered cooperation cannot be reduced to unilateral provision by China to Africa. African governments, regional organizations, universities, firms, workers, civil society groups, and communities are co-producers of outcomes. Mohan and Lampert [7] show that African actors have negotiated, reshaped, and sometimes driven engagements with China, although their capacity to do so is uneven. A people-centered interpretation must therefore recognize multiple forms of African agency instead of treating the continent as a uniform recipient.

3.2. Common Prosperity and Multidimensional Well Being

The second feature is the connection between modernization and broadly shared well-being. Common prosperity is not identical to equal income, nor does it eliminate the importance of markets and growth. It expresses the principle that the gains of development should progressively improve the conditions and opportunities of the population as a whole. This goal draws attention to employment quality, access to education and health care, rural-urban inequalities, social protection, and the distribution of public resources.

The multidimensional character of this idea is equally significant. Chinese modernization combines material development with cultural, social, and ecological goals. This wider scope is compatible with a capability perspective, which rejects income as a complete measure of development. It also supports a more demanding assessment of international cooperation. A project that raises output but degrades health, excludes local communities, or creates skills that cannot be used would perform poorly under a human-centered standard. A project with modest immediate financial returns may still have high developmental value if it improves public health, education, women's economic participation, or institutional learning.

The evidence on Chinese development finance illustrates why multidimensional evaluation is needed. Dreher *et al.* [8] find that Chinese development finance is associated with short-term economic growth in recipient countries. Martorano *et al.* [9], using project and household data for sub-Saharan Africa, find improvements in education and child mortality in areas exposed to Chinese assis-

tance, while detecting no effect on child nutrition. These findings show that growth and welfare effects can coexist, but they also vary across outcomes. Cruzatti Constantine *et al.* [10] report lower infant mortality associated with Chinese aid at the national level, but estimate higher infant mortality in aid-exposed subnational locations relative to the average within the same recipient country. This within-country average is the subnational comparison benchmark. Human-centered cooperation must therefore monitor distribution as well as averages.

3.3. Independent, Peaceful, and Sustainable Modernization

The third feature is the importance assigned to national conditions and independent development. Chinese modernization is presented as a path formed through China's own historical experience rather than as a universal institutional template. This principle can support pluralism in international development: societies may learn from one another while retaining authority over their goals, sequencing, and institutions. China's 2021 white paper on international development cooperation similarly emphasizes respect for national conditions, South-South cooperation, and the improvement of partner countries' independent development capacity [11].

For Africa, the value of this principle depends on how it is practiced. Respect for national ownership should mean more than responding to requests from central governments. It should include alignment with continental and national strategies, consultation with affected groups, transparent assessment of long-term obligations, and room for African institutions to adapt technologies and curricula. It should also acknowledge that national ownership can be contested within a country. Government priorities, community interests, labor rights, and environmental concerns do not always coincide.

Peaceful development and ecological harmony add further dimensions. Development partnerships should avoid reproducing relationships based on coercion, extraction, or zero-sum rivalry. They should also account for environmental costs and climate vulnerability. In this sense, the human-centered content of modernization extends beyond present beneficiaries. It includes the capabilities and security of future generations. Green energy, climate-resilient agriculture, public transport, water systems, and ecological protection are therefore human development investments when they protect livelihoods and broaden access rather than merely adding technical capacity.

4. Convergence with African Development Priorities

The African Union's Agenda 2063 provides the most appropriate political framework for assessing the relevance of Chinese modernization to Africa. Agenda 2063 seeks an integrated, prosperous, and peaceful Africa driven by its own citizens. Its aspirations include inclusive growth, sustainable development, good governance, cultural identity, gender equality, youth empowerment, and a stronger African role in the world [3]. This framework makes clear that African development is not

an empty space into which an external model can be inserted.

There is substantial conceptual convergence between Agenda 2063 and people-centered Chinese modernization. Both reject the reduction of development to economic aggregates. Both connect productive transformation with social improvement. Both emphasize national or continental agency, the role of education and skills, and the need for development benefits to reach broad populations. The convergence is particularly clear in Agenda 2063's aspiration for people-driven development and in the Chinese formulation of development for, by, and shared among the people.

Convergence does not imply identity. Agenda 2063 emerges from African historical experiences, Pan-African commitments, and the continent's own institutional priorities. African states also differ considerably in their political systems and policy choices. A credible partnership must preserve these differences. The relevance of Chinese experience lies in the demonstration that modernization can be pursued through long-term planning, infrastructure provision, industrial policy, agricultural transformation, skills formation, and experimentation suited to local conditions. The lesson is methodological rather than prescriptive: development strategies work through institutions that fit social conditions, mobilize domestic capabilities, and retain the ability to learn and adjust.

This distinction matters because the language of shared development can otherwise obscure asymmetry. China possesses far greater financial, technological, and organizational resources than most African partners. Rudyak [12] argues that Chinese aid is shaped by relational ideas of reciprocity and mutual assistance, while also recognizing that reciprocity exists within unequal relationships. Brautigam [13] cautions against simplistic claims that all Chinese lending constitutes deliberate debt-trap diplomacy, but rejecting that narrative does not remove the need for debt sustainability, transparency, and project scrutiny. A human-centered partnership should neither romanticize cooperation nor reduce it to geopolitical suspicion. It should examine concrete outcomes, bargaining processes, and the distribution of benefits and risks.

5. The Human Dimension of Existing China Africa Cooperation

China-Africa cooperation already contains a substantial human development component. Education scholarships, university partnerships, vocational training, agricultural demonstration, medical teams, hospital cooperation, public health programs, and professional seminars have accompanied trade, infrastructure, and investment. The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) Beijing Action Plan for 2025-2027 expands this agenda. It links talent development to modernization, supports vocational education and Luban Workshops, calls for stronger university cooperation, promotes training in science and technology, and includes programs for women, youth, public health, and employment [14]. The plan's language that development should be for, by, and shared among the people provides

an explicit bridge to the human-centered logic discussed above.

Academic research shows both the promise and the conditional nature of these activities. King [15] notes that China's education cooperation with Africa developed through scholarships, training, higher education partnerships, and human resource development, often following a South-South discourse distinct from traditional donor frameworks. Agbebi [16] argues that the human capital effects of Chinese investment vary across sectors and national settings, especially in local employment, skill building, and technology transfer. This variation is crucial. The presence of a Chinese-financed project does not automatically create local learning. Outcomes depend on recruitment practices, supplier linkages, training design, language, regulation, and the technological capacities already present in the host economy.

Employment research offers a similar picture. Tang [17] finds substantial diversity in the employment practices of Chinese enterprises and warns against treating all firms or African labor markets as the same. More recent quantitative evidence indicates that Chinese infrastructure assistance can raise local employment near project sites. An *et al.* [18] report employment gains during construction and longer-term effects associated particularly with education, health, water, and power projects. The results support the proposition that infrastructure can serve human development. They also imply that sector choice and the connection between construction and local labor markets shape the durability of benefits.

Educational cooperation illustrates the difference between access and capability formation. Scholarships and exchanges expand opportunities for individual students, while university partnerships can build research networks and institutional relationships. Mulvey [19] argues that tertiary education cooperation creates relational networks and epistemic communities that benefit participants while also advancing China's influence. These dual purposes need not make cooperation illegitimate, but they reinforce the need for transparency and reciprocal agenda-setting.

The recent expansion of vocational education is especially relevant. Vocational programs can connect skills directly to industrialization, infrastructure maintenance, agriculture, logistics, health technology, and digital services. Li and Jiang [20] describe a vocational turn in China-Africa education cooperation, including the spread of Luban Workshops and programs combining Chinese language with technical skills. Their analysis suggests that institutional embedding in African education systems is central to whether these initiatives deliver lasting developmental value. Training that remains externally designed or detached from local qualification systems may produce certificates without sustainable career pathways. Training co-designed with African institutions and employers can contribute to national skill ecosystems.

6. Implications for a More Human Centered Partnership

6.1. Connect Physical Projects to Lasting Capabilities

The first implication is that every major physical project should include a capability plan. Infrastructure agreements often specify cost, engineering standards, fi-

nancing, and construction schedules. A human-centered agreement should also specify local employment targets, apprenticeships, management training, technology transfer, supplier development, maintenance capacity, and post-completion responsibilities. These components should be budgeted and monitored rather than treated as informal side effects.

Such a plan must extend beyond the number of local workers hired. Short-term construction employment is valuable, but it does not by itself create the technical and organizational capacity to operate, repair, regulate, or reproduce infrastructure. The relevant questions are whether local employees move into skilled roles, whether domestic firms become suppliers and subcontractors, whether training is recognized in national qualification systems, and whether local institutions can manage the asset after handover. Agbebi's [16] framework is useful precisely because it separates employment, skill formation, and knowledge transfer instead of assuming that one automatically produces the others.

Infrastructure should also be selected and evaluated according to the services it enables. A transport corridor can reduce travel time to schools and markets; an electricity project can improve health facilities and small-enterprise productivity; a digital network can extend education and public administration. These effects should be built into project design. The evidence that Chinese-supported education, health, water, and power projects generate relatively durable employment effects strengthens the case for integrating social infrastructure with productive investment [18].

6.2. Build Locally Governed Education and Skill Ecosystems

The second implication is to move from isolated training opportunities toward locally governed skill systems. Scholarships, seminars, and short courses can benefit participants, but their effects may dissipate if they are not linked to employment, research institutions, professional standards, and career progression. Cooperation should begin with sector-level skill assessments led jointly by African education authorities, employers, trade unions, professional bodies, and training institutions. These assessments can identify shortages in areas such as renewable energy, rail maintenance, advanced agriculture, nursing, public health, data science, and industrial management.

Vocational cooperation should combine classroom instruction with workplace learning and recognized credentials. Curricula should be adapted to local languages, regulations, equipment, and labor-market needs. African instructors should participate in curriculum design from the beginning and receive support to become independent trainers. Equipment donations should include maintenance plans, replacement costs, open technical documentation where possible, and access to software or spare parts. The objective is not simply to operate a Chinese technology package but to enable African institutions to teach, adapt, and improve the underlying knowledge.

Higher education cooperation should likewise shift from mobility alone to joint

knowledge production. The planned expansion from the 20 + 20 university scheme toward broader university partnerships can support joint laboratories, co-supervised postgraduate education, locally defined research agendas, and sustained institutional funding [14]. Research priorities should be set in relation to African development problems and the comparative strengths of both sides. Intellectual property arrangements, data governance, authorship, and access to research outputs should be agreed transparently. These details determine whether cooperation creates shared capability or reinforces dependence on external institutions.

6.3. Treat Health, Care, and Social Inclusion as Productive Investment

The third implication is to recognize social sectors as foundations of economic transformation. Healthier and better educated populations can participate more fully in production and public life. Health cooperation should therefore combine the delivery of services with institutional strengthening. Medical teams and equipment can meet urgent needs, but long-term value comes from training health workers, improving laboratories and surveillance, strengthening primary care, supporting local pharmaceutical capacity, and building systems able to respond to future shocks.

Existing evidence supports both ambition and caution. Martorano *et al.* [9] find positive effects of Chinese projects on education and child mortality, while Cruzatti Constantine *et al.* [10] report lower infant mortality at the national level but higher mortality in aid-exposed subnational locations relative to the recipient-country average. These findings justify geographically disaggregated monitoring. A national improvement does not guarantee that remote areas, women, migrants, or poorer communities benefit proportionately. Project evaluations should therefore examine access, quality, affordability, and distribution.

Women and youth deserve particular attention because they are central to Agenda 2063 and because unequal access can prevent aggregate growth from becoming inclusive development. Training programs should track completion, employment, income progression, enterprise creation, and participation in decision-making by gender, age, disability, and location. Childcare, safe transport, language support, and flexible schedules may determine whether formal opportunities are practically accessible. These are not secondary social additions. They shape who can convert a nominal program into a real capability.

6.4. Institutionalize African Agency and Co Design

The fourth implication is to make African agency an operational rule. Participation is often invoked in general terms but left undefined. A human-centered partnership requires identifiable decision points at which African actors can influence objectives, technology choices, procurement, social safeguards, implementation, and evaluation. For projects affecting land, livelihoods, or public services, approval and first disbursement should require a consultation record in accessible local languages, a written response to each substantive community objection, and a documented decision on whether the design was revised. A designated host-

country review body should verify the record and provide a route for unresolved objections before approval. This condition gives affected communities a consequential voice even when government and investor priorities differ.

Co-design can reduce several recurring problems. It can reveal whether proposed training matches actual labor demand, whether land and resettlement plans reflect community needs, whether imported technology can be maintained locally, and whether vulnerable groups face barriers to access. It can also help distinguish a government request from a broadly supported development priority. Mohan and Lampert's [7] account of uneven African agency suggests that the design of institutions matters: some actors possess greater bargaining power and access than others. Participation mechanisms should therefore make room for groups that may not be represented in high-level negotiations.

African agency also operates at continental and regional levels. Alignment with Agenda 2063, the African Continental Free Trade Area, regional infrastructure plans, and African education and health strategies can prevent fragmentation across small bilateral projects. Regional coordination is especially valuable for cross-border transport, energy markets, disease surveillance, digital standards, scientific research, and professional qualifications. China can support such coordination without determining its content.

6.5. Measure What Changes in People's Lives

The fifth implication concerns evaluation. China-Africa cooperation is often reported through inputs and outputs: the value of finance, number of projects, kilometers of road, training places, scholarships, hospitals, or equipment delivered. These indicators are useful but incomplete. A people-centered framework should add outcomes that capture what people can actually do after an intervention.

For employment, indicators should include job duration, wages, occupational progression, safety, training, and the share of local workers in technical and managerial positions. For education, they should include completion, competency, employment relevance, instructor localization, and institutional capacity. For health, they should include service coverage, affordability, workforce retention, and changes in health outcomes across regions and groups. For infrastructure, they should include reliability, maintenance, user access, local supplier participation, and the effect on time, income, schooling, or health.

Evaluation should be joint and sufficiently independent to identify problems. African statistical agencies, universities, and research institutes should receive resources to collect baseline and follow-up data. Findings should be published in accessible forms where security and privacy permit. The purpose is not to create a punitive ranking system. It is to support learning and adaptation. Martorano *et al.* [9] and Cruzatti Constantine *et al.* [10] demonstrate the value of combining geocoded project data with household-level outcomes. Future cooperation can improve the underlying data so that policymakers do not have to infer human effects from project counts.

6.6. Cross-Cutting Theme: Integrate Digital and Green Transitions with Inclusion

Across the five priorities above, digital and green cooperation will shape the next phase of modernization. Both fields can expand capabilities, but both can also reproduce inequality. Digital education and health platforms can reach underserved communities, yet access depends on electricity, devices, connectivity, affordability, language, and digital literacy. Artificial intelligence and data systems raise further questions about privacy, bias, cybersecurity, and control over public data. A human-centered approach requires African participation in standards, system design, data governance, and the development of local technical expertise.

Green development presents a similar challenge. Renewable energy and climate-resilient infrastructure can protect livelihoods and expand reliable power. Mineral extraction for the energy transition can, however, impose local environmental and social costs. Cooperation should connect green projects to community benefits, local processing, worker skills, environmental monitoring, and transparent revenue arrangements. The principle of harmony between humanity and nature becomes meaningful internationally only when ecological protection and distributive effects are incorporated into concrete decisions.

7. Challenges and Safeguards

A human-centered agenda faces practical tensions. The first is the tension between speed and participation. Chinese firms and financial institutions are often valued for delivering projects quickly, while consultation, local procurement, and institutional coordination take time. The answer is not to abandon efficiency but to include participation and capability requirements early enough that they do not become late-stage obstacles.

The second tension concerns measurable outputs and long-term learning. It is easier to count training places than to determine whether training changed careers or institutions. Longitudinal evaluation costs money and may reveal disappointing results. Yet without it, ineffective programs can be repeated. A modest number of well-integrated programs may create more value than a large number of disconnected activities.

The third tension is between mutual benefit and unequal capacity. China and African partners can both gain from cooperation, but they do not enter every negotiation with equal resources. Transparent contracts, competitive procurement where appropriate, debt and fiscal assessment, public reporting, and independent review can improve the quality of consent. Brautigam's [13] critique of the debt-trap narrative usefully rejects a sweeping geopolitical label; a human-centered approach complements that critique by insisting on project-specific evidence and borrower welfare.

The fourth challenge is policy diversity. Practices differ across Chinese ministries, banks, provinces, universities, state-owned enterprises, and private firms, just as priorities differ across African countries and communities. Broad political

commitments will not implement themselves. FOCAC can establish shared principles and reporting categories, but sectoral and national institutions must translate them into enforceable standards, budgets, and responsibilities.

Finally, a human-centered perspective must avoid paternalism. The language of helping people can itself become hierarchical if external actors decide what people need. The safeguard is agency: African institutions and communities must have a substantive role in defining well-being, setting priorities, and judging results. Human-centered cooperation is credible when people are participants with claims and knowledge, not merely beneficiaries counted after decisions have been made.

8. Conclusions

The human-centered meaning of Chinese modernization provides a useful framework for rethinking China-Africa cooperation. Its central proposition is that modernization should be assessed by the development of people as well as the accumulation of assets. This proposition connects the Chinese emphasis on people-centered development and common prosperity with Agenda 2063's commitment to an Africa driven by its own citizens.

The practical implication is not a turn away from infrastructure, industrialization, or trade. It is a change in how these activities are designed and evaluated. Physical investment should generate local skills, decent employment, institutional learning, accessible services, and sustainable operating capacity. Education and health cooperation should be embedded in African systems rather than organized as isolated projects. Digital and green partnerships should widen access while protecting rights and local agency. Evaluation should measure durable changes in people's lives and the capabilities of African institutions.

Research on Chinese engagement in Africa gives reason for qualified confidence. Chinese finance and projects have supported growth, employment, education, and health in a range of settings, but the effects differ across sectors, places, and groups. These differences suggest possible pathways through which project design, access, local bargaining, and institutional capacity may shape inclusion and durability. The cited studies do not establish every causal pathway. A human-centered agenda makes these possibilities explicit and tests them through disaggregated evaluation.

The most defensible lesson of Chinese modernization is therefore not that Africa should follow a single Chinese route. It is that modernization can be pursued through long-term investment, institutional experimentation, productive transformation, and attention to broad social welfare while remaining grounded in national conditions. China-Africa cooperation will best reflect this lesson when it expands the capacity of African people and institutions to choose, build, and sustain their own paths of development.

Funding

This research was supported by the Xinmiao Talent Program of Zhejiang Prov-

ince, China (Project No. 2025R404A018), under the project entitled "The Roles and Responsibilities, Current Challenges, and Strategies of Chinese Enterprises in International Communication with Africa from the Perspective of National Image Building"; and the National College Student Innovation and Entrepreneurship Training Program (Project No. 202610345045), under the project entitled "China-Africa Cooperation in Investing in People from the Perspective of Chinese Modernization: Internal Logic, Practical Constraints, and Mechanisms for Advancement."

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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