

# Science fiction offers a useful way to explore China-Africa relations

September 16 2019, by Nedine Moonsamy

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In 2007 the then President of China, Hu Jintao, delivered a [speech](#) to South Africans acknowledging the benefits of a strategic partnership. He also stressed that the connection is not merely pragmatic. It must, he argued, serve to honour and deepen the countries' long abiding friendship in the future.

The idea of friendship has undoubtedly [informed](#) the nature of Sino-African engagement. But if we use contemporary [science fiction](#) as a barometer, African sentiment towards China appears more inclined towards dystopian forecasts.

Science fiction writing often serves as a [thought experiment](#) that explores shared and hidden beliefs whose material and political reverberations lie further in the future. Various short stories portray how China's economic ascension, operating under the guise of African development, uses technology as a means to invade and control Africa.

Narratives of this kind surface neo-colonial fears that a ["new scramble for Africa"](#) seems imminent. But they also provide a speculative arena to interrogate how we ultimately perceive the value, use and future of Sino-African political friendship.

As I've explored [in my research](#), this means that science fiction can serve as an imaginative production of political theory. It intercedes in ways that [international relations](#) cannot because of the confines of diplomacy.

## Three stories

My [research](#) focused on three short science fiction stories from Africa.

In the first, Tendai Huchu's "The Sale", China has taken control of Zimbabwe through the production of a corporatised state called CorpGov. It's a surveillance state that leaves no room for political dissension. Zimbabwe has been purchased by China in a piecemeal fashion. It is now set to lose its last free portion of land in a final sale. When a young Zimbabwean man fails to prevent the sale of this remaining plot of land, he succumbs to despair and puts himself in the path of a Chinese bulldozer.

His suicide evokes a sense of profound helplessness and warns that China will need to be vehemently counteracted in the near future to protect Zimbabwe's already breached borders. Huchu's narrative provides a sharp sense of clarity that makes the story incredibly impactful.

The pathos of "The Sale" holds a mirror up to China. It communicates an earnest appeal for more humane engagement. Yet the heaviness of its dystopian narrative also breeds a spirit of nihilism or Afropessimism. This overrides any sense of African accountability in the degenerative state of future Sino-Zimbabwean relations.

Abigail Godsell's "Taal" (an Afrikaans word meaning "language") is self-conscious in this regard. It's set in the year 2050, after a nuclear war between China and America has left the entire globe in a state of desolation. As a result, the South African government willingly signed over ownership of the country to China in exchange for protection.

The central protagonist, an especially resentful young woman named Callie, has joined a militant rebel group in a covert attempt to overthrow the Chinese. But after injuring a soldier, she pulls off his helmet and is surprised that he converses in Afrikaans because, to all other appearances, he is Chinese. The fact that he speaks Afrikaans implies he is a South African. She is stupefied by the exchange: it highlights her simplistic understanding of what the enemy should look like.

This uncanny revelation undoubtedly draws attention to the spectral presence of Chinese-South Africans who have not received due recognition as bona fide citizens.

Callie, who is initially critical of Chinese propaganda, begins to read her positionality as a South African freedom fighter on equally problematic terms. Her defensiveness drops and she confesses that South Africa was

caught off-guard amid a global crisis. The country did not have a sufficient national security plan; China has offered significantly more protection than the South African government was capable of at the time.

Godsell's introspective narrative shift focus away from Chinese agitation. It allows the reader to consider the nature of South African apathy by conveying that the country may not lack a fighting spirit but, unlike China, lacks the necessary foresight and organisation to bolster the nation.

Negative representations of China in the African imaginary gesture at the idea that a certain amount of envy informs the continent's responses to China. They also suggest that African countries can benefit from emulating China's uncompromising nationalistic and commercial drive. This possibility is more fully explored in Mandisi Nkomo's "Heresy".

Nkomo's narrative is set in the year 2040. South-South interactions challenge the global status quo. China has risen in global economic rankings. But South Africa has not fallen under its sway: the nations are caught up in a highly competitive space race. South Africa is determined to not be outdone by the Chinese and channels its resources in meeting this goal.

"Heresy" conveys how Africans can construct an invisible enemy out of China by exponentially accelerating South African development. This light-hearted narrative assumes the challenge of imagining the current tension of Sino-African relations otherwise. It shows how friendly rivalry can inadvertently lead to African progress.

## **Rethinking friendship**

In their book *Friendship and International Relations*, academics Andrea

Oelsner and Simon Koschut [write](#) that it is: "necessary to think of international friendship not as something that is merely being performed at the intergovernmental level but as something that is being enacted in the day-to-day activities and imaginations at all levels of society."

This certainly includes science [fiction narratives](#) that present us with a "succession of literary experiments, each one examining a small part of a much larger image and each equally necessary to the greater vision".

Through these short stories, it immediately becomes possible to consider how China-Africa relations need not result in Chinese neocolonialism and African exploitation. They offer us more creative approaches to political friendship by reinventing and reinterpreting the roles of both parties in their narratives.

Similarly, pursued in this way, the future of China-Africa relations need not be seen as a singular act of solidarity that demands repeating. Instead it could be viewed as a more fluid encounter that allows for mutual investment in world-building projects while also providing enough objective distance to nurture difference and autonomy.

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