Roskilde Universitet

Chinese Economic Influence in Africa: Case Study of Zimbabwe

Authors: Maciej Grzymkowski and Marta Olejniczak
Supervisor: Laust Schouenborg
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Abstract:

This paper explores the relationship between China and Zimbabwe, focusing on the research question of whether China's economic involvement in Zimbabwe is exploitative or mutually beneficial. The topic holds significance for the field of international development, as it provides insights into alternative development models and China's increasing investment in Africa. It also sheds light on power dynamics in international relations and the complexities of development cooperation. Additionally, the study has implications for the field of International Public Administration and Politics, as it offers insights into governance, diplomacy, power dynamics, development aid, and policy implications. The research question of the paper is: “Is China’s economic involvement in Zimbabwe exploitative or mutually beneficial?”. Using the dependency theory supplemented by the structural functionalist model, we have determined that the relationship is only mutually beneficial from the perspective of Harare’s political elites, whereas these benefits are not felt by Zimbabwe’s population, with Zimbabwean workers being mistreated and exploited by Chinese employers.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, China has emerged as a global economic and political powerhouse. Its influence on the world stage cannot be underestimated, as it is now the world's second-largest economy (Barboza, 2010), and a major player in international trade, investment, and diplomacy. The country's unprecedented rise since the 1980s can be explained by the success of Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Opening Up policies, which have opened up the country's economy to the outside world and led to the People's Republic of China becoming what is commonly referred to as "the world's factory," especially after the nation's inclusion into the World Trade Organization (Mees, 2016).

As China's influence has expanded rapidly in recent years, it has become a more proactive player on the international stage, both diplomatically and economically. Throughout the 2010s, the PRC has started a number of ambitious global initiatives, with the most prominent one of them being The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which revolves around opening new economic corridors linking 70 "corridor economies" across Asia, Europe, and Africa, with China as the centerpoint (World Bank, 2018). The Belt and Road Initiative is part of the country's larger strategy to shift from international trade and export-led growth to outward direct investment as the main way for the People's Republic to integrate into the world and exert influence on global affairs (Wang & Li, 2017).

Chinese outward direct investment in developing economies as part of the Belt and Road Initiative and its other initiatives was particularly impactful in Africa. In a survey of five countries labeled as the 'host economies' of China's investment efforts, the respondents cited job creation as the main positive contribution of these initiatives (Wang & Li, 2017). Indeed, the average share of foreign employees at Chinese outward direct investment firms oscillated between 40 and 70 percent between 2007 and 2014. However, the surveyed countries (Liberia, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Zambia, and Nigeria) also responded that they do not consider technology transfer to be a significant part of China's impact on their economies (Wang & Li, 2017). This suggests that although China does make positive contributions when it comes to creating jobs and local industrialization (another factor included in the survey), the PRC does not transfer their proprietary technology and know-how to these developing countries equally as eagerly, raising questions about the intentions behind its rampant investments on the continent.

When assessing China's relationship with Africa and the effect that the PRC's large investments have on the continent, it is necessary to consider the Middle Kingdom's strategic interests which guide their actions on the international stage. First of all, Africa is a continent rich in natural resources. It holds 40% of the world's gold, as well as 90% of platinum and chromium. Furthermore, about 30% of the mineral reserves on Earth are located in Africa, as well (UNEP). The majority of the planet's most valuable resources such as platinum, diamonds, cobalt, uranium, or lithium lie in Africa (UNEP). Without the latter, it would not be possible to produce rechargeable lithium-ion batteries that power smartphones, laptop computers, electric cars, and grid energy storage.

Perhaps most importantly in the context of China's needs as an emerging potential superpower, Africa is home to 12% of the Earth's oil and 8% of its mineral reserves (UNEP). Over the course of the 2000s, China's oil consumption has doubled, but the country is only able to provide less than 50% of its demand through domestic production (Alden & Alves, 2009). According to recent forecasts, the PRC's dependency on foreign oil will exceed 80% by 2030 (Wang, et al., 2018). Securing enough resources to be able to satisfy its growing energy demands is among China's top priorities, therefore it is important to assess the country's increasing, generous investments in Africa through the lens of its efforts to procure enough energy to not only fulfill the needs of its population, but also continue to implement the Chinese Communist Party's ambitious initiatives, both domestically and abroad.

The first of these initiatives is the Belt and Road Initiative, briefly outlined earlier in this paper. Another one is the Made in China 2025 industrial policy, a key element of China's plans to move away from being the world's leading manufacturer, of cheap, labor-intensive, and simple goods, to a technological leader on a global scale, with a focus on high-tech innovation, smart manufacturing, and Internet of Things appliances (Xinhua News Agency, 2017). The success of the Made in China 2025 policy is dependent on the country's access to a number of natural resources. Besides the oil and natural gas necessary to supply the energy that a massive industrial transition like this requires, cobalt and lithium are used in the vast majority of electronic and high-tech equipment that China intends to focus on as its planned main growth driver.

Lithium and cobalt can both be found in abundance in African countries, many of which China is already investing copious amounts of funds in. The Democratic Republic of Congo is home to the world's largest cobalt reserves (Shengo, et al., 2019), and significant supplies of lithium are located in Zimbabwe, Ghana, Namibia, or Mali (Goodenough, et al., 2021). Given China's ambitions to transform its industry into one focused on innovation and high-tech manufacturing, the Chinese government's investments in that part of the world could have been at least partially strategically motivated by the desire to gain access to these valuable resources that would enable this transition to come to fruition.

Another strategic interest that can be used to explain China's motivations for its large investments on the African continent is the gaining of influence on the international political stage through the use of debt in the long-term. The term "debt-trap diplomacy," coined by Indian scholar Brahma Chellaney is commonly used in academia to describe the way China uses the debt it holds over smaller, less developed countries as a way to exert political influence (Chellaney, 2017). According to proponents of this view, China's infrastructure investments and loans issued to developing countries are predatory practices, carried out with the goal of attaining strategic leverage over the indebted states. The most famous example used in journalism and academia to illustrate debt-trap diplomacy is Sri Lanka. After borrowing billions of dollars from China to fund various infrastructural projects, the country found itself unable to pay the building mountain of debt and forced to agree to debt-equity swap arrangements for many of the aforementioned projects, as a result of which the amount owed would be paid off by granting equity in these projects to Chinese companies, equivalent to how much was owed (Behuria, 2018).

On the other hand, the notion of "debt-trap diplomacy" is being dismissed by a significant number of scholars as a "conspiracy theory" and an example of "Yellow perilism" that creates a false image of China as a country that uses its loans and investments as a means of "ensnaring" other nations (Sautman & Hairong, 2019). Another popular narrative that ties into the "debt-trap diplomacy" discussion is that the PRC is using the Belt and Road Initiative as a way of advancing its geopolitical goals abroad, to "counterbalance perceived American predominance" and "present China as a viable alternate global leader to the United States" (Clarke, 2018). Calling upon the PRC using state-owned enterprises to conduct the vast majority of its outward FDI as part of the BRI framework, with these investment decisions being heavily politically influenced, concerns are being raised about the creation of the indebted countries becoming politically dependent on China (Karlis & Polemis, 2019). Although frequently reiterated in the mainstream Western media landscape, these notions are often disputed in the academia, on account of the "fragmented and poorly coordinated international development financing system," as well as pointing towards the recipient countries' responsibility to carry out due diligence when it comes to accepting inward FDI from China and approving BRI projects, especially in areas such as the viability and financial sustainability of each project, and making sure that the local populations will reap "developmental benefits" from their implementation, claiming that as far as China is concerned, the BRI is purely an economically-motivated, profit-driven initiative (Jones & Hameiri, 2020).

When discussing recent Chinese investments in Africa and the country's economic influence in the continent, the Belt and Road Initiative must be taken into account. Under the BRI, the PRC has already invested in 52 out of 54 African countries (Lokanathan, 2020). Interestingly, even the countries that have not signed a memorandum of understanding or expressed support for the BRI have been heavily invested in by China (Lokanathan, 2020). With such large-scale, persistent implementation of the initiative, an in-depth analysis of China's activity in Africa within the context of the BRI is therefore necessary in order to obtain a better understanding of the country's motivation and true nature of its involvement in the continent.

Finally, there is the question of China presenting an "alternative path" to Western-led development and modernization. In the PRC, the country's own success story is referred to as the "demonstration of an alternative to the Western growth model that is of interest to developing countries in the Global South" (Guppy, 2022). This statement has been frequently reiterated in the Chinese press in recent years, supplemented by the notion that the Western approach to development is predicated upon the acceptance and application of "Western values and development model" (Zhang, 2019). The People's Republic of China positions itself as a role model for developing countries, claiming to offer a development path that does not infringe on the domestic affairs and political systems in the developing nations, instead presenting a way forward that is purely focused on economic development. Thus for the purposes of this thesis, it is imperative to compare and contrast the economic relations between Africa and Western powers and international organizations, both past and present, to answer whether or not China's claims to provide an alternate, more effective path towards development are backed up by on-the-ground evidence of notable improvements in the lives and economic well-being of the local populace. It will help determine the extent to which China's activity in African countries is motivated by the great power competition with the West, mainly the United States versus a purely economically-motivated, mutually beneficial bilateral cooperation model between itself and the African states.

2. Problem Area and Research Question

The People's Republic of China under Xi Jinping has drastically increased its investments in Africa, both as part of the Belt and Road Initiative, as well as bilateral agreements. China's impact on the continent has frequently been described in the West as a means of projecting influence and advancing its own geopolitical goals, without regard for facilitating progress and improving the situation in recipient nations. The involvement, the large Chinese investments in heavily polluting enterprises, and China's dominance in the telecommunications sector are often cited as evidence to back up that claim (Link, 2021).

On the other hand, there have been many positive impressions of Chinese activity in Africa coming from the African nations themselves. In an Afrobarometer survey, an average of 59% of respondents from 18 African countries perceived China's political and economic influence on their nations as "positive" (Sheehy, 2021). Job creation is another effect of China's investments in Africa that is applauded in the recipient countries (Wang & Li, 2017).

In this thesis, we will take a look at the case study of the economic relations between China and Zimbabwe from 2000 until the present day. We will assess the impact of Chinese aid and investments in Zimbabwe through the lens of China's need for natural resources sourced from Zimbabwe to analyze the benefits the PRC reaps from this relationship, the state and impact of the BRI projects in the country to see whether or not there is any ground to the claims that the initiative is used to advance China's geopolitical goals, and finally, the effect that Chinese involvement had on Zimbabwe itself in relation to the country's development. The Dependency Theory will aid us in assessing whether or not the China-Zimbabwe relationship fits into the "core-periphery" dynamic. Structural Functionalism will enable us to determine the key functions of Chinese involvement in Zimbabwe both from the perspective of the African nation, as well as that of China.

The main goal of this thesis is not to confirm or deny the PRC's ambitions for global dominance through investment in Africa, but rather to answer the following question: "**Is China's economic involvement in Zimbabwe exploitative or mutually beneficial?"** Our findings suggest that it would be incorrect to classify China's activity as the exploitation of Zimbabwe. However, the mutual benefit of this relationship is experienced by the political elites in Harare, who have turned a blind eye to China's mistreatment of Zimbabwean workers.

3. Literature Review

The history of foreign powers' involvement in Africa is long and painful. The People's Republic of China is a relatively recent player on the international stage, and so its investment and economic involvement in Africa don't have an overly long history, either. Their beginnings can be traced back to the 1960s and the period of decolonization. In order to obtain a full picture of how the PRC's actions in Africa affect the continent, with a particular focus on Zimbabwe, this literature review is comprised of three sections: the history of China's involvement in Africa and its past and present motivations, an overview of literature comparing the Chinese approach to investing in Africa to colonialism, and finally, an assessment of selected works pertaining to China-Zimbabwe relations.

The goal of this section is to provide a comprehensive overview of the literature relevant to the case study in this thesis, to ground it in the history of China's interactions with African states over the years, as well as provide additional context to its relations with Zimbabwe.

China's Involvement in Africa and Its Motivations

An extensive body of literature exists on Chinese foreign direct investments in Africa, with the majority of publications having come out post-2000. However, the People's Republic of China has been investing on the continent long before it joined the World Trade Organization, and there have been instances of significant Chinese infrastructure projects in African countries even prior to Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Opening Up policies. Looking at the long-term trajectory of China's involvement in Africa will help us assess not only the country's interests in that part of that world, but also its own transition from a developing country to a power that projects its influence abroad.

Chinese economic activity in Africa can be divided into two periods: 1954-1999, when the PRC was mainly active in aid projects on the continent, and 2001 until the present day, a period of increased commercial investment projects being put in motion. Pippa Morgan and Yu Zheng's "Tracing the Legacy: China's Historical Aid and Contemporary Investment in Africa" is one of the most comprehensive documents providing an overview of Chinese economic activity in the region. Starting from 1954, China got involved in sending assistance to developing African nations in the form of "medical teams, agricultural technical stations, (...) railways, roads, textile mills, and hydropower stations" (Morgan & Zheng, 2019). A major milestone in the history of China's investments in Africa was the introduction of the Reform and Opening Up policies in 1978. It was then that the country started moving away from granting interest-free loans, towards investment strategies that were more "economically sustainable and rational," with particular focus being given on improving past projects that had "declined or failed" (Morgan & Zheng, 2019). Finally, the establishment of the China Development Bank and the Export-Import Bank of China in 1994 laid down the foundation for the PRC's foreign direct investment strategies in Africa that continue being enforced to this day (Morgan & Zheng, 2019). Morgan & Zheng attribute the inclusion of China in the World Trade Organization in 2000 and the subsequent initiation of the "Going Global" policy in 2001 as the starting point where China's investments in Africa surged. Since its introduction, the Chinese FDI stock in Africa grew "from $75 million US dollars in 2000 to $2.9 billion in 2015" (Morgan & Zheng, 2019).

A working paper with a study conducted by Carike Claassen, Elsabé Loots, and Heini Bezuidenhout on Chinese foreign direct investment in Africa concluded that Chinese investors are primarily focused on three key industries: construction, oil, and mining, suggesting that resource security is one of Beijing's main motivators when it comes to placing investments (Claassen et al., 2011). Another one of such factors is food security, illustrated by the fact that China is growingly investing in the agricultural sector and buying up land in various African states, including Zimbabwe. They have also arrived at the conclusion that, although political stability is important for Chinese investors, "this factor becomes less important if the potential market is attractive enough" (Claassen, et al., 2011). Finally, they point toward the fact that with China having invested in 45 out of the 53 African states in the period between 2003 and 2008, the PRC could also be counting on these states' political support on multilateral platforms (Claassen, et al., 2011).

The idea that China's investments in Africa are primarily driven by resource-seeking is also supported by a number of other studies on this subject. Rian Drogendijk and Katarina Blomkvist in "Drivers and Motives for Chinese Outward Foreign Direct Investments in Africa," published in the Journal of African Business state that China's behavior is resource-seeking, market-seeking, as well as "motivated by strategic assets," while pointing out that resources are the main motivation, outweighing markets and strategic assets (Drogendijk & Blomkvist, 2013). Although large ethnic populations originating from the investing countries also tend to be a major driver of FDI in many cases, Drogendijk and Blomkvist rule that factor out, citing the fact that "there are few countries in Africa with substantial Chinese minorities" (Drogendijk & Blomkvist, 2013).

"Understanding China's move into Africa: an empirical analysis" written by Mario Biggeri and Marco Sanfilippo brings into attention another important characteristic of Chinese investment behavior in Africa. Namely, the paper stated that "risk perception does not seem to represent a severe constraint for Chinese investment," citing the examples of substantial investments in Sudan amidst the Darfur crisis, as well as China's "economic cooperation with dictatorial regimes, such as that of Mugabe in Zimbabwe" (Biggeri & Sanfilippo, 2009). The scholars highlighted that it is particularly the case when it comes to exploiting natural resources, which falls in line with other literature written on the topic.

When talking about China's involvement in Africa, as well as its economic activity outside of its borders in general, it is also important to factor in the PRC's loans given out to developing countries. In Chapter 7 of "China-Africa and an Economic Transformation," titled "Chinese Loans and African Structural Transformation," Deborah Brautigam discusses the evolution of China-Africa economic relations, focusing on the role of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) and the increasing scale of Chinese loan pledges to African countries.

Established in 2000, FOCAC has institutionalized and simplified China's economic cooperation and assistance pledges for African development. Since 2006, loan pledges have become a regular part of FOCAC summits and ministerial meetings, with the amount pledged increasing from $5 billion in 2006 to $35 billion in 2015, plus an additional $5 billion in zero-interest loans and grants. In 2018, the Chinese pledge combined grants, interest-free loans, and concessional loans ($15 billion) and added $20 billion in lines of credit (Brautigam, 2019).

Brautigam also highlights that African governments have primarily borrowed from China to fund infrastructure projects and productive projects aimed at adding value to Africa's natural resources, including agriculture. This focus has a long history, with examples from the 1960s, such as Guinea's use of Chinese loans to construct a cigarette and match factory, a hydroelectric station, a tea plantation and factory, and a vegetable oil-pressing mill.
During the 1980s and 1990s, Chinese companies in Africa began to find construction an attractive business, bidding on projects financed by other bilateral and multilateral donors, African governments, and the private sector. By 2016, Chinese engineering, procurement, and construction (EPC) companies' annual revenues from African projects had climbed to $50 billion, with Africa providing over a third of global EPC revenues (Brautigam, 2019).

Between 2000 and 2016, African governments and their state-owned enterprises borrowed approximately $130 billion from Chinese lenders. The majority of Chinese loans to Africa went towards transportation, with at least $40.6 billion (31% of loans) financing the building or upgrading of roads, railways, ports, airports, and harbors. China has financed four greenfield railway projects and provided loan finance for the renovation of several previously existing railways (Brautigam, 2019).

The extent of Chinese lending through the FOCAC and other initiatives clearly shows that the main use of Chinese loans was to finance transportation infrastructure projects. In the case study section of this thesis, we will take a closer look at the loans China has provided Zimbabwe with, assessing the nature of the projects they funded, as well as whether or not Zimbabwe is capable of paying them off in the future, helping us see whether or not they fall into the “debt-trap diplomacy” concept described in the introduction.

Another crucial area of interest when it comes to the Chinese-African economic relationship is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Despite having been announced in 2013, an overwhelming abundance of academic literature has been published on the topic, a lot of which focuses on Africa’s role in the BRI, and vice versa: the BRI’s impact on the development of the continent’s economies.

In "The China Model in Zimbabwe: the Belt and Road Initiative and Beyond," W.D. Ganda delves into the implications of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) on Zimbabwe's “Look

East" Policy. Ganda emphasizes the importance of understanding the BRI's strategic objectives to analyze the future trajectory of Sino-Zimbabwe relations.

Ganda identifies two primary strategic objectives of the BRI. The first is to revive China's economic growth, which has experienced a decline in recent years. The author argues that the BRI aims to counter this downturn by fostering outbound foreign direct investment and creating new export markets for Chinese goods in sectors with overcapacity. This perspective aligns with the broader literature on China's economic ambitions (Ganda, 2020).

The second strategic objective, as outlined by Ganda, is to promote development in China's Western regions, which were initially overlooked during the early stages of economic reform. By integrating these regions into the mainstream economy, the BRI seeks to foster inclusive development and alleviate socioeconomic tensions. This objective is consistent with the literature on China's regional development strategies (Ganda, 2020).

However, Ganda contends that the BRI's focus on addressing overcapacity and rebalancing regional development ultimately renders it more inward-looking. The author highlights the potential limitations of Chinese-funded projects in terms of local economic spill-offs, as they often require procurement from China as a precondition for funding. This observation contrasts with the practices of Western multilateral financial institutions, which prioritize accountability and reforms (Ganda, 2020).

In the context of Zimbabwe, Ganda suggests that the BRI's strategic objectives may not lead to short-term development of local manufacturing industries. Instead, the country is likely to continue attracting Chinese investment in resource industries, particularly minerals. The author posits that maintaining a friendly regime in Harare is crucial for China to secure access to these resources, reinforcing the notion that China will remain Zimbabwe's most significant ally amid strained relations with Western powers (Ganda, 2020).

China's Approach to Africa and Colonialism

The body of academic literature comparing China's investments and lending in Africa to colonialism is much more limited than the works pertaining to the Belt and Road Initiative or those that assess the scope, scale and motivations of the PRC's economic activity in the region. However, there have been works published on that topic. Herbert Jauch's "Chinese Investments in Africa: Twenty-First Century Colonialism" is one such article that draws a direct comparison between China's growing interest in the continent and the exploitative activity of Western powers in Africa during colonial times.

In his writing, Jauch places a significant focus on the labor conditions at sites operated by Chinese companies in Africa. The author points towards the attitudes of Chinese employers towards trade unions, which are often hostile, subpar working conditions, and other unfair labor practices. He writes that some of the lowest-paid jobs in Africa are those at Chinese companies, citing the example of a copper mine in Zambia paying its workers "30 per cent less than other copper mines in the country" (Jauch, 2011). Jauch concludes his paper by claiming that the relationship between Chinese enterprises and African nations is "far from mutually beneficial," and that African workers are being exploited by their employers from the PRC, even going as far as calling referring to "Chinese business people as the new colonizers" (Jauch, 2011).

In "The Chinese in Africa: New colonialism is not a new deal," O.E. Bayo agrees with Jauch's view that the relationship between Chinese investors and African countries cannot be classified as mutually beneficial. The author supports this claim by drawing comparisons between the exploitative activities of colonial powers with the characteristics of the Chinese presence in Africa. Some of the most notable examples include:

"the scramble for raw materials, investment outlets and markets in exclusive spheres of influence, (...) dominance of foreign financial capital through offers of loans, aid, grants and credit for the construction of infrastructure such as railways, ports, roads, and other communication facilities, (...) indirect interference in local politics in order to have unfettered access to Africa's mineral resources" (Bayo, 2011).

While as opposed to Western colonialism, Chinese influence is not politically imposed, Bayo suggests that it does not make China's actions any less exploitative simply because they are carried out under the guise of friendly cooperation and aid. Much like the authors of this thesis, Bayo also calls upon the lens of the Dependency Theory to interpret the contemporary China-Africa relationship, fitting it into the theory's "core-periphery" dynamic. The author also draws parallels between China's support for authoritarian regimes like that of Robert

Mugabe in Zimbabwe, and "Britain's land monopoly in Zimbabwe and Southern Africa" (Bayo, 2011). Bayo concludes his work by writing that "although China does not impose its political will on Africa, the operative form of trade and the evidently lop-sided Sino-African economic relationship suggests nothing more than the continuation of waning Western neo-colonial domination" (Bayo, 2011).

Writing for *The Diplomat,* Jean-Marc F. Blanchard reiterates the notion that China's economic activity in Africa is oriented towards strengthening the PRC's resource security, but also points out the fact that many of the country's investments in infrastructure are aimed at facilitating the "internal exchange of goods, services, and peoples" (Blanchard, 2018). The author goes on to write that even the airports, ports, and special economic zones that are designed to bring resources in and out of China are also "dual use" in nature, which means that they are not limited to transfers to and from the People's Republic. The article's conclusion, in a similar manner to Wang & Li (2017), suggests that the issue of the lack of clear mutual benefit in the context of China-Africa cooperation stems not from China's colonial inclinations, but rather from the fact that the "host countries need to improve their ability to bargain with the Chinese side by leveraging other countries, companies, and manipulating market access," claiming that severing ties with Chinese capital will not result in a better future for African nations (Blanchard, 2018).

Ying Chen of the University of New England School of Law offers a different view. In "China's Investment and Trade in Africa: Neo-Colonialism or Mutual Benefit," she calls China and Africa "well-matched partners," citing a number of benefits that both African states and the People's Republic of China can reap from the cooperation. On the African side, the author cites infrastructure improvements, such as "2,233 kilometers of railway" and "3,391 kilometers of highways," as well as investments exceeding $5.3 billion dollars into hydropower plants and other facilities (Chen, 2015). The opening of new trade opportunities was also called a major benefit to Africa. Chen writes that China's become "Africa's biggest export destination." Finally, China's financing of projects in Africa is also considered beneficial for Africa in this paper, namely in terms of loans that are "generally granted with no interest or lower interest rates, generous grace periods, and extended repayment terms" (Chen, 2015). When it comes to China's benefit, Chen mainly focuses on the PRC's large imports of natural resources from Africa, positing the Sino-African relationship as the answer to China’s need for oil, as well as “shortages of industrial minerals, such as aluminum, copper, and nickel” (Chen, 2015).

All in all, the body of literature on the Sino-African relationship in relation to the concept of new colonialism analyzed in the above paragraphs suggests that there is substantial foundation to the claims that China does, in fact, engage in the exploitation of African countries for natural resources. The unfair labor practices, dominating African markets with Chinese capital, and disproportionate focus on natural resources all fall in line with the notion that Chinese economic activity in Africa is geared towards extracting as much wealth from the continent as possible all the while giving as little of benefit in return as possible. On the other hand, though, as Ying Chen pointed out in her work, Africa’s gains from the cooperation with China should not be disregarded, with many African leaders praising the People’s Republic of China for its treatment of their states as equal partners (Chen, 2015).

China-Zimbabwe Relations

Fueled by China's significant demand for resources to power its industrial economy, today's engagement between China and Zimbabwe still largely reflects the resource-driven relationship of the past. This initial phase of the Zimbabwe-China relationship dates back to pre colonial times when the rulers of Great Zimbabwe traded with imperial dynasties in China, exchanging ivory and gold for Chinese-made porcelain. Therefore, to gain a deeper understanding of the current state of the relationship between China and Zimbabwe, it's crucial to look back centuries before the era of African nationalism, which tends to dominate the discussion today (Chirikure, 2014).

The year 1979, when the Rhodesian War took place, marked a critical juncture in the history of Zimbabwe, then known as Rhodesia. The Soviet Union, a global superpower at the time, supported Joshua Nkomo's Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU), which was fighting against the Rhodesian government. The Soviet Union supplied ZAPU with arms. On the other hand, there was Robert Mugabe, whose attempts to gain Soviet support for his Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) were rejected. In response to this, Mugabe turned to Beijing, a rival of Moscow, seeking their support. The culmination of this outreach was a meeting in Mozambique in January 1979, where both sides affirmed their intent to cooperate more closely (Eiseman, 2005). The meeting was a significant turning point in

Mugabe's quest for power. Finally, after years of conflict, Zimbabwe gained independence from Britain on April 18, 1980 (Paul, et al. 2013). On the same day, Zimbabwe and China formally established diplomatic relations, marking the beginning of a long-lasting relationship between the two nations.

In 2002, the European Union imposed sanctions on Zimbabwe as the Zimbabwean government prevented the deployment of an EU Election Observation Mission. The decision came after weeks of negotiation and threats from the EU about visa ban and asset freeze on Mr Mugabe and 19 other senior officials. Eventually, the EU cut off EUR 128 million of development aid for 2002-2007 (The Guardian, 2020). As a consequence of this situation, the relationship between Zimbabwe and China has become stronger. China has earned the reputation of being the "only major international supporter" of Zimbabwe, thanks to its policy of non-interference in matters such as human rights violations (Spiegel & Le Billon, 2009).

The year 2003 marked a significant turning point in the relationship between Zimbabwe and China. At that time, Robert Mugabe announced his “Look East” policy. This policy signaled a shift in Zimbabwe's foreign policy, away from its traditional reliance on European aid and towards greater cooperation with Asian countries. As part of its “Look East” policy, Zimbabwe began to cultivate stronger ties with Asian countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Singapore. However, its focus was primarily on developing a closer relationship with China (Youde, 2007). Mugabe saw China as a potential ally and strategic partner, given its growing economic power and willingness to engage with African countries. Over time, the meetings between the Chinese and Zimbabwean governments increased, with the purpose of these encounters documented in numerous reports on the lasting friendship between the two countries.

As a result of these intensified exchanges, a number of new trade and cooperation agreements were concluded. These agreements covered a wide range of areas, including defense, infrastructure development, and technology transfer (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2004). Despite criticisms from some quarters over issues such as governance and human rights, Zimbabwe's “Look East” Policy has continued to attract attention worldwide. The policy demonstrated Zimbabwe's willingness to diversify its economic ties and reduce its dependence on Western nations. It also highlighted China's growing influence in Africa and its willingness to engage with countries outside its traditional sphere of influence.

China's economic and commercial ties to Zimbabwe expanded extensively and diversified between 2003 and 2013, leaving virtually no aspect of Zimbabwean life untouched by Chinese influence. This substantial connection ranks Zimbabwe among the countries with the most significant Chinese influence, spanning across industries such as mining, construction, agriculture, telecommunications, retail, and hospitality. Generally, China's development in Zimbabwe trades for Zimbabwean natural resources (Alao, 2014). The most evident indication of the China-Zimbabwe relationship is the impressive growth in their trade links. In the first five months of 2012, bilateral trade rose by 20% to $533 million. By year-end, Zimbabwe's trade with China reached $800 million, doubling the previous year's trade levels (Moyo, 2013). This growth in Zimbabwean exports to China is mainly due to minerals, particularly diamonds. However, many Chinese businesspeople have also established small-scale businesses in the country. According to the Chinese embassy in Harare, approximately 5,000 Chinese nationals live and work in Zimbabwe, and 53 Chinese companies were officially registered with the Chamber of Chinese Enterprises in Zimbabwe in 2012 (Moyo, 2013). Despite diversification, certain key areas have attracted the most significant concentration of Chinese investment and trade links, which will be discussed below.

According to the paper "Belt and Road Initiative: Positioning Zimbabwe for Investment Opportunities" written by Rangarirai Muzapu, Taona Havadi, and Kudzai Mandizvidza, in 2013 Chinese government started the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which offers significant investment opportunities for Zimbabwe.

Zimbabwe has the potential to exploit the benefits of the BRI, as infrastructure development is a key pillar of the initiative. The paper suggests that Zimbabwe produces materials used in infrastructure development, and with the BRI's focus on extensive infrastructure development, there could be a greater demand for these materials. The paper highlights that strategic positioning of Zimbabwe to attract local and foreign businesses is crucial for the country to fully benefit from the BRI. To achieve this, the government needs to create a conducive business environment and adopt an open attitude towards investment. The start of The Belt and Road Initiative offered significant investment opportunities for Zimbabwe to exploit its competitiveness across the region and the world at large (Muzapu, et al. 2018)

Toward the end of 2015, Zimbabwe announced its decision to adopt the Chinese yuan as its reserve currency, a move that signaled the country's deepening ties with China and its commitment to the "Look East" policy. This decision not only served as a gesture of friendship towards China but also presented an opportunity for Zimbabwe to negotiate the cancellation of its Chinese debts, estimated at $40 million (Powell, 2015). The adoption of the yuan as a reserve currency has several implications for Zimbabwe's economy. Firstly, it demonstrates the country's willingness to align itself more closely with China, both economically and politically. Additionally, the move may help stabilize Zimbabwe's currency situation, as the country has faced significant challenges with hyperinflation and currency devaluation in the past. However, the decision to adopt the yuan as a reserve currency also raises concerns about Zimbabwe's economic independence. By becoming more reliant on China, Zimbabwe may find itself increasingly susceptible to external pressures and influence from its powerful partner. This reliance could potentially undermine the country's ability to pursue its own economic and political interests.

The relationship between China and Zimbabwe has been a long-standing one, characterized by mutual assistance and cooperation. The Embassy of The Peoples Republic of China in the Republic of Zimbabwe has emphasized that the two countries are "good friends, good brothers and good partners with a shared future and a long tradit ion of mutual assistance in times of need." This relationship has been strengthened in recent years through various forms of cooperation in areas such as trade, investment, education, and culture. One of the most notable areas of cooperation has been in the fight against COVID-19. China has donated millions of doses of COVID-19 vaccines to Zimbabwe and sent medical teams and agricultural experts groups to provide much-needed medical and agricultural expertise. This support has been crucial in helping Zimbabwe to combat the pandemic and protect its citizens. In addition to the support provided in the fight against COVID-19, China has also encouraged well-established and capable Chinese companies to invest in Zimbabwe. These investments are revitalizing resources that were long idled and actively investing in various industries such as tobacco planting and export, crop farming, building materials manufacturing, and freight logistics. These investments are introducing Zimbabwe's high-quality products into international markets, bringing considerable forex earnings and tax revenues, tens of thousands of job opportunities, and technology transfers, and promoting Zimbabwe's competitiveness in the global economy. The bilateral trade between China and Zimbabwe has continued to grow, reaching US$973 million in the first half of 2022, with an increase of 56.6%. China imported US$504 million from Zimbabwe and exported US$469 million to Zimbabwe, up 103.2% and 25.6% respectively. This growth in trade is a testament to the strong economic ties between the two countries. Furthermore, people-to-people exchanges in education and culture have also been expanding, while cooperation in political parties and parliaments has been promoted in recent years. This cooperation has helped to strengthen the relationship between China and Zimbabwe and promote mutual understanding and respect. Despite the challenges that both countries face, the China-Zimbabwe relationship is expected to continue to grow and deepen in the coming years. China has expressed its commitment to supporting Zimbabwe's economic and social development, and to promoting win-win cooperation between the two countries. This relationship will undoubtedly be an important factor in shaping the future of both China and Zimbabwe, as well as the wider African continent. As such, it is important for both countries to continue to work together and build on the strong foundation of mutual assistance and cooperation that has been established over the years (Shaochun, 2022).

4. Theoretical Perspectives

Dependency Theory

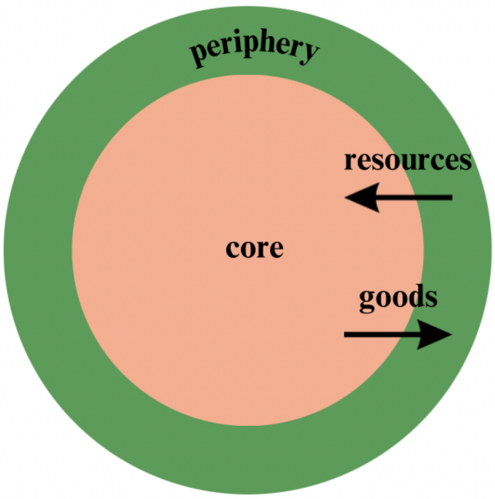
Dependency theory originated from the observation that the trade between developed and underdeveloped nations is inherently unequal, as underdeveloped countries export raw materials and agricultural goods while importing manufactured products from developed countries. This creates a cycle of dependency, where underdeveloped countries become increasingly reliant on developed countries for their economic development.

Vladimir Lenin's idea that advanced and capitalist nations would absorb the wealth of underdeveloped nations provided an early foundation for dependency theory, but it was the work of Hans Singer and Raúl Prebisch in 1949 that gave rise to the theory's official origin. Prebisch's ideas on protectionist trade practices and import-substitution industrialization provided a path forward for underdeveloped countries to develop their economies sustainably.

The Marxist and Structuralist schools of thought within dependency theory had some differences, but they both agreed that the periphery's inability to develop a dynamic and independent process of innovation was at the core of the relationship between the periphery and center. Dependency theory thus rejected the modernization theory's view that underdeveloped countries simply needed to be accelerated along a supposed common path of development through investment, technology transfer, and closer integration into the world market. Instead, dependency theory recognized the unique features and structures of underdeveloped countries and advocated for a different approach to economic development.

Prebisch defined the “center” (i.e. “core”) as “made up of the affluent and advanced countries,” whereas the periphery as “made up of underdeveloped poor countries” (Namkoong, 1999). Following these definitions, we have fit China and Zimbabwe into this dynamic, with China, the world’s second-largest economy (World Bank, 2021) as the core, and Zimbabwe, the significantly poorer and underdeveloped state, as the periphery.

The image below is the graphical representation of the dependency between core and periphery:



Structural Functionalism

The theory of structural functionalism is a macro-level theory that was most prominent in sociology, but is also applicable to the study of international relations. Its origins can be traced back to Emile Durkheim, a French social scientist, who first attempted the identification of the “functions of divisions of labor” in his 1893 book titled “The Division of Labor in Society” (Durkheim, 2014). In the field of sociology, structural functionalism is based around the premise that “society needs a certain level of social cohesion, solidarity, or integration in order to function," with structural functionalism serving as a framework for identifying the various forms and sources of said cohesion (Dew, 2014). One of the tenets of structural functionalism most pertinent to this thesis is the idea that the theory attempts to explain certain social phenomena by identifying their underlying functions (Podgórecki & Łoś, 1979).

Functionalism and structural functionalism has been adopted by a number of different academic fields, including political science. One of the most prominent examples of functionalism being used in political science is Gabriel Almond's work on the political systems in developing countries, recorded in his 1960 book, "The Politics of the Developing Areas." In it, Almond proposes a model of functional categories which are universal for every political system. He divides them into two subcategories: input functions and output functions. Input functions include political socialization and recruitment, interest aggregation, interest articulation, and political communication. Output functions, on the other hand, are as follows: rule-making, rule application, and rule adjudication (Almond & Coleman, 2015).

In the analysis of the case study of China's economic involvement in Zimbabwe, we will take into account the input functions of a political system as outlined in the Almond model. It will supplement our dependency theory-based analysis of the China-Zimbabwe relationship through unveiling how the intricacies of Harare's political system contributed to creating an environment where China was able to pursue its strategic interests through its economic involvement in Zimbabwe. Fusing the two approaches and applying the structural functionalist lens to assessing China's impact on various social structures in Zimbabwe has enabled us to distinguish the benefits that the political elites in Harare derive from the relationship from the impact it has on the local population.

Operationalization of Theories

Answering our research question using the lens of the dependency theory supplemented by the theory of structural functionalism will require splitting it up into two parts, and assign the theories to a single part of the question. To reiterate, the research question is as follows:

"Is China's economic involvement in Zimbabwe exploitative or mutually beneficial?"

A holistic approach to the research question using both theories would render the thesis repetitive, and the results of such an approach could potentially be inconclusive. One way to avoid this outcome is to use each theory to establish a degree to which the China-Zimbabwe relationship is either exploitative or mutually beneficial. Thus, the research question can actually be read as two separate questions for the purposes of the case study analysis:

1. ***"Is China's economic involvement in Zimbabwe exploitative?"***
2. ***"Is China's economic involvement in Zimbabwe mutually beneficial?"***

Looking at the findings of our case study in this manner allows for their interpretation through the use of the two theories in the most complete way possible. The dependency theory, having to do with the inherently unequal nature of trade between developed and developing economies, can be applied to determining the extent to which China exploits the Zimbabwean population and the country's natural resources for its own benefit. Structural functionalism, on the other hand, is much better-suited to help us identify the benefits that both parties derive (or don't derive) from China's economic involvement, due to its focus on structures within societies and the functions they carry out within them.

To answer the first part of the research question, the dependency theory will be operationalized to assess whether or not the relationship between China and Zimbabwe is an exploitative one or not. This will be done by looking at the examples of investments in natural resource extraction and production facilities in Zimbabwe in which China has a substantial stake in the case study section. We will take into account factors such as job creation, labor regulations obedience at these sites, and the division of profits generated. Insights will be also taken from Chinese activity in Zimbabwe under the pretense of the Belt and Road Initiative, primarily the infrastructure investments: the purpose they serve, their monetary worth, and their usefulness for the local population. All of these observations will allow us to determine whether or not the China-Zimbabwe relationship fits within the "core-periphery" model that is central to the dependency theory, and to what extent.

When it comes to the second branch of our research question that asks whether the economic relationship between China and Zimbabwe is mutually beneficial or not, we will use the input functions of political systems as outlined by Gabriel Almond to analyze the actions of the Chinese and Zimbabwean governments. Dependency theorists argue that "tax concessions, guarantees of profit repatriation, and labor laws unfavorable for workers" granted to the investing country in the core-periphery dynamic contribute to high rates of income inequality, which are beneficial to both the investors and the periphery country's political elites who directly benefit from the investments (Tausch, 2010). The Almond model will provide additional context to this dynamic and how the government in Harare contributed to its establishment. We will assess China's loans and investments in Zimbabwe to assess the instruments of Chinese economic policy, consider their goals, and how they serve in the further formation of China's agenda in that part of the world. We will apply the same lens to Zimbabwean policies, namely the "Look East" policy. By looking at its goals, instruments, and role in forming Zimbabwe's agenda with regard to Chinese investments on its soil, we will be able to conclude whether or not the economic relationship between the two countries serves to the benefit of Zimbabwe, as well as China, as understood by the goals of their respective policies.

Although the theories are operationalized to target the two parts of our research question separately, they are not going to be used for their respective parts exclusively. The dependency theory can also be used to determine the extent of mutual benefit China and Zimbabwe are getting out of their cooperation, and we will use it to gauge the material benefits and losses by applying it to the findings of our research when assessing the Chinese economic policy and Zimbabwe's "Look East" policy, which will be analyzed from the structural functionalist perspective. When it comes to the first part of the research question, regarding the exploitative nature of the relationship, a structural functionalist lens will be useful when applied to dependency theory-based analysis of the investments made by Chinese entities in Zimbabwe. By diving into the way these investments have not only affected the economic well-being of the countries, but also their impact on the social and political structures in Zimbabwe, we will be able to obtain a full picture that will in turn allow us to give a more concrete answer to the first part of our research question.

5. Methodology

The methodology section of this study outlines the research design, data collection, and analysis techniques employed to investigate the phenomenon of exploitation and mutually beneficial relationships in social and economic contexts between China and Zimbabwe.

Exploitation is a term used to describe the situation where one party takes advantage of another party for their own benefit, often resulting in an unequal distribution of power and resources. According to the domination-based approach to exploitation, the exploiter's unethical behavior lies in their disrespectful and exploitative use of power over the exploited party in exploitative relationships (Ferguson & Veneziani, 2018). This exercise of power can take up several forms. Karl Marx, on the other hand, defines exploitation in the context of labor, as "the unequal exchange of labor for goods" (Roemer, 1985). These two approaches to the concept of exploitation have guided us throughout the case study, leading us to determine that looking at the domination-based approach, it cannot be said that China is exploiting the country of Zimbabwe, as their actions are motivated by the opportunity presented to them by the Zimbabwean government itself, whose officials significantly benefit from the relationship. From the worker's perspective, however, a case can be made that they are being exploited by Chinese employers, as the findings of our case study do point out instances of unfair treatment and undercompensation of Zimbabwean employees. Once again, however, this is being done with the permission of Zimbabwe's rulers, who turn a blind eye to China's disobedience of the country's labor laws.

The principle of mutual benefit is also applicable in the context of interactions between states, where both parties stand to gain from cooperation. In such scenarios, the principle asserts that each state should behave in a manner that enables the other state to achieve its desired outcomes (Sugden, 2018). This involves ensuring that the consequences of the interaction are consistent with the normal expectations of both states. In essence, the principle of mutual benefit in state-to-state interactions is based on the idea that both parties should benefit from the exchange, and that neither party should be put at a disadvantage. This principle is particularly important in the context of international relations. For this, cooperation and mutually beneficial relationships between states are crucial for maintaining peace, stability, and prosperity in the global community. Thus, when countries follow the principle of mutual benefit, they can create good relationships that are helpful for everyone involved, not just themselves.

In the context of this paper, the term "exploitation" is used to describe the phenomenon whereby China utilizes the natural and human resources of African countries for its own benefit, without taking into account long-term welfare and development of the African nations. The other point of view presents a "mutually beneficial relationship". This characterization is based on the idea that both parties stand to gain from cooperation and exchange. On the one hand, China has tried to secure access to Africa's natural resources, such as oil, minerals, and timber, to fuel its rapidly expanding economy. On the other hand, African countries have benefited from Chinese investment in many fields, for example: in infrastructure, education, and healthcare, which has helped to promote economic growth and social development on the continent.

The relationship between China and African countries has been the subject of much debate among scholars and policymakers. There are differing views on whether it can be characterized as mutually beneficial or exploitative. This study seeks to provide an understanding of the nature of this relationship, and to explore the complex dynamics that underlie it. One of the most important issues we will examine is the extent to which China's engagement with Africa involves the exploitation of African countries' resources. These include both natural and human resources. While some argue that this exploitation is a necessary part of China's economic growth and development, others have raised concerns over the negative impact it may have on the economic and social development of African countries. We will examine the various factors that contribute to this dilemma. Taking into consideration economic incentives, political dynamics, as well as historical legacies, we aim to provide a nuanced perspective on the relationship between China and Africa and its implications for both regions.

Research Approach

In order to achieve the aims of this study, we decided to use a qualitative research approach with the base in secondary sources that include academic literature, policy documents, and media reports. The decision to rely on secondary sources is based on the fact that there already exists an extensive body of existing research and analysis on the relationship between China and African countries, which we believe will provide a valuable basis for our study. This approach will allow us to critically review and analyze existing scholarship, which has already examined many of the key issues, dynamics, and debates related to China-Africa relations. Then, through applying the two theoretical lenses of Dependency Theory and Structural Functionalism to the research, we will be able to conclude whether or not the economic relationship between China and, in our case, Zimbabwe, is an exploitative or mutually-beneficial one.

By utilizing secondary sources, we can conduct a thorough and comprehensive review of the available literature on this topic. It will enable us to build on and synthesize existing knowledge. This approach will also help us to compare and contrast different perspectives and findings, identify gaps in the literature, and highlight areas where further research is needed. The aim of our analysis is to provide a detailed picture of the nature, scope, and dynamics of the relationship between China and Zimbabwe, and to explore the implications of this relationship for the economic, social, and political development.

In addition to our review of secondary sources, we will also conduct a case study of Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe is a significant recipient of Chinese investment and aid, and as such, provides a valuable case study for examining the dynamics of China-Africa relations in practice. By focusing on a specific country, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complex factors and interests that underlie this relationship and explore how they play out in a particular context. Our case study will involve a detailed analysis of Chinese investment and aid in Zimbabwe, including not only the nature of Chinese involvement in the country's economy, but also the effects of this involvement on local communities and industries.

Selection of Theories

In our paper, we intend to incorporate several theoretical frameworks to provide a comprehensive analysis of the research question. Specifically, we plan to utilize Dependency Theory and Structural Functionalism as the primary lenses through which to explore our topic.

Dependency theory

Dependency theory is a critical perspective that highlights the imbalanced distribution of resources and power in the global economy. This theory posits that a core group of wealthy countries, primarily in the West, benefit from the exploitation and dependence of a periphery of poor and underdeveloped states in the Global South. (Harvey et al., 2010). One of the central tenets of dependency theory is the concept of resource flow. According to this theory, resources such as raw materials, labor, and capital flow from the periphery to the core, enriching the latter at the expense of the former. This process is facilitated by global economic systems such as trade agreements, investment policies, and international financial institutions. Dependency theory argues that poor states are kept in a constant state of underdevelopment because of their integration into the global economic system. Specifically, poor countries are forced to specialize in the production of raw materials and commodities, which are then exported to wealthier countries for processing and value-added production. This results in poor countries being vulnerable to fluctuations in commodity prices, and lacking the necessary resources to develop their own domestic industries.

Dependency theory can be a useful framework for examining the relationship between developed countries like China and developing countries like Zimbabwe. Using this theoretical lens can shed light on the dynamics of resource flow and power relations between the two countries. Examining the relationship between China and Zimbabwe through the lens of dependency theory may reveal the ways in which China's investments in Zimbabwe affect the latter's economic well-being and development. This could include unequal exchange of resources, unequal power relations in the investment agreements, and unequal distribution of profits and benefits. Moreover, using dependency theory can help to uncover how Zimbabwe's dependence on China is sustained and reinforced by broader global economic systems and institutions. For example, the role of international financial institutions, such as the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund, in shaping Zimbabwe's development trajectory and economic policies. Overall, by utilizing dependency theory to analyze the relationship between China and Zimbabwe, researchers may gain important insights into the underlying causes of Zimbabwe's underdevelopment and the broader implications of global economic systems for developing countries.

Structural functionalism

Structural functionalism is a way of looking at society that sees it as a complex system made up of different parts, such as institutions, relationships, roles, and norms. Each part of society has a specific purpose and is necessary for the functioning of the whole. This theory says that parties are interdependent, which means that when something changes in one party, it creates impactful tension between that party and other parties. The idea of structural functionalism comes from a French social scientist named Émile Durkheim. He believed that society has a set of shared beliefs, values, and moral standards that guide people's behavior. Overall, structural functionalism helps us understand how society works and how its different parts fit together to keep it stable. By studying how these different parts are connected and function, we can learn how society adapts to change and overcomes challenges.

We decided to use structural functionalism theory to study the relationship between developed countries like China and developing countries like Zimbabwe. This theory can provide important insights into how the different parts of these societies work together and how both countries are dependent on each other. We can look at the institutions, relationships, roles, and norms that exist between China and Zimbabwe, and how they interact with each other. We can examine how trade, aid, and other forms of interaction between the two countries affect the economies, politics, and cultures of both.

By using structural functionalism to analyze this relationship, we may gain a better understanding of how both countries benefit from their interactions, and how they contribute to each other's stability and growth, i.e. identify their functions in relation to one another. This could help answer our research question. Interdependence of both countries is strongly related to the idea that their cooperation is mutually beneficial.

Theory Selection Summary

With the dependency theory, it can be examined to what degree China is exploiting Zimbabwe through resource flow from a periphery of poor and underdeveloped states to a core of wealthy states. In the case of our paper, the “periphery” would be Zimbabwe, with China serving as the “core.” Valuable insights into how the economic relationship between China and Zimbabwe may be affecting the development of Zimbabwe can be provided by this theory.

Similarly, the mutual benefits of the relationship between China and Zimbabwe can be analyzed through structural functionalism. This theory can supplement our understanding of how both China and Zimbabwe affect each other by assessing the function that Chinese investments have in Zimbabwean society. By combining both dependency theory and structural functionalism, a comprehensive understanding of the economic relationship between China and Zimbabwe can be gained, enabling us to assess the extent to which the relationship is exploitative, while also identifying the potential mutual benefits of the interaction between the two countries.

Why Zimbabwe?

We have decided to conduct a case study on Zimbabwe for several reasons. Firstly, during colonial times, Zimbabwe was heavily dependent on the colonizer, who exploited the country's resources and labor force. As opposed to other colonized nations in Africa, the case of Zimbabwe is one where the native inhabitants continued to be heavily “internally” dependent on the settlers, a relationship that is explored in more detail in the literature review section of this paper. This unique relationship between the colonizers and the colonized provides a point of reference for assessing the extent to which China has made the Zimbabwean society dependent on its foreign direct investment projects.

Another reason why we have selected Zimbabwe as the subject of our analysis and case study is the fact that it has been ruled by a corrupt, authoritarian regime ever since the country gained independence in 1980. Under Robert Mugabe and ZANU-PF’s leadership, Zimbabwe serves as a unique example of a nation that has been ostracized on the international stage, cut off from Western-backed sources of funding, and forced to rely primarily on Chinese loans and investments for the development of its economy. It is also a resource-rich state, posing an opportunity for China to leverage its investments to partially alleviate its need for raw materials and natural resources. This, combined with the dominance of one party over Zimbabwean politics, makes Zimbabwe a prime choice for the purposes of our thesis, as it allows us to explore the relationship through the lens of the dependency theory, as well as the mutual benefits that political elites of both countries derive from this cooperation.

Finally, China already has a significant influence in Zimbabwe. The country has already received significant loans from China, and Chinese companies have set up operations in the country, with various infrastructure projects being carried out partially or in whole by these enterprises. However, when considering all the countries in Africa in which China has invested, Zimbabwe is not the recipient of the largest amount of funds from China. According to the report on Chinese FDI stock in Africa from 2020, it ranked 9th, with approximately 1.7 billion USD being invested in the country by that point in time (Galal, 2020). Therefore, carrying out our case study on Zimbabwe can make our findings more useful for future scholars who can use it as a comparison point for assessing the Chinese economic involvement in other countries, because the Chinese FDI stock in that country is closest to the median of the foreign direct investments in African countries.

In conclusion, the decision to conduct a case study on Zimbabwe is motivated by the country's unique history of colonialism and exploitation, its significant Chinese investment, and making our thesis as useful for further researchers as possible. Zimbabwe's rank in the report on Chinese FDI stock in 2020 highlights the need for further examination of the country as a case study to better understand the dynamics of Chinese investment in African countries. The unique political and economic situation in Zimbabwe also presents an opportunity to explore China's motivations for investing in African countries and the implications of such investment on a given country's political and economic development.

6. Background

The economic relationship between China and Zimbabwe has become the most pronounced since 2000, shortly after the imposition of sanctions on the Mugabe regime by Western countries and the establishment of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), which has played a pivotal role in China's economic involvement not only in Zimbabwe, but also in all of Africa (Chun, 2014). The tightening of relations between the two countries was also made possible thanks to the Zimbabwean regime's "Look East" policy, announced in 2003 as a reaction to Zimbabwe being sanctioned by Western powers. Since then, the commercial and economic connection between China and Zimbabwe became so pronounced and all-encompassing that "hardly any aspect of Zimbabwean life did not feel the Chinese impact" (Alao, 2014). The best example of just how impactful China's activities in the region were to Zimbabwe is trade. In 2022, trade between the PRC and Zimbabwe reached a "record-high" of $2.43 billion dollars (Xinhua News Agency, 2023), marking a threefold increase since 2012, when the trade volume between the two nations stood at $800 million dollars (Alao, 2014).

We've already established that the economic links between Zimbabwe and China are remarkably strong, and have been rapidly getting stronger over the course of the last decade. This background chapter, divided into five parts, will focus on the colonial history of Zimbabwe and the key Chinese interests in the region: developments under the banner of the Belt and Road Initiative in Zimbabwe and the PRC's scramble for natural resources. The third part will assess Chinese lending to Zimbabwe with the purpose of determining whether or not the country exhibits signs of having fallen into a “Chinese debt trap.” Finally, we will take a closer look at Zimbabwe’s “Look East” policy, lay out its main goals and motivations, and assess its impact on the China-Zimbabwe economic relationship.

Colonial History of Zimbabwe and Decolonization Period

The beginnings of the colonization of Zimbabwe can be traced back to the 1890s and the activity of the British South African Company in the region. Under the leadership of Cecil Rhodes, the company set up its mining operations in the land, naming it Southern Rhodesia, after the leader of the entire project. The main focus of the British South African Company’s mining efforts in Southern Rhodesia was gold (Madimu, 2018). Dr. Tapiwa Madimu outlined the colonial economy of the region under the British South African Company in “Farmer-Miner Contestations and the British South Africa Company in Colonial Zimbabwe, 1895-1923.” The paper provides a clear overview of the British colonial actions in Southern Rhodesia and how the Zimbabwean land was exploited to the British South Africa Company’s benefit.

Upon first reaching the land in 1890, the British opened “two large mines, the Cotopaxi and the Dickens, in Fort Victoria district in 1893.” These mines were to become the first of many in the mining-based economy envisioned by the British South Africa Company for the region (Madimu, 2018). In the subsequent years, more gold mines were opened in Southern Rhodesia. The British South Africa Company held a 50% share in all of the mines, and sold off the rest on the stock market back in London, setting up the region’s economy to be powered primarily by gold mining (Madimu, 2018). The British South Africa Company had set up the economy in a way that gave the miners minimal basic rights to water, timber, and grazing of animals. Under the Mines and Minerals Ordinance of 1895, British mining prospectors were given the right to expropriate land from Zimbabwean inhabitants. The African miners were allowed to “graze up to 20 draught animals,” as well as use wood and water for domestic purposes. The right to use wood was granted under the condition that the miner compensates white farmers for it (Madimu, 2018). As more white settlers flocked to Southern Rhodesia, the agricultural sector in the region expanded, as well. Settler farmers were given financial support by the British South Africa Company in the form of generous grants. However, many settlers also sold off the land they expropriated from African owners to various foreign companies in the region, which in turn held onto it with the purpose of selling it off when land prices go up. Before the turn of the century, “these big companies held 9.3 million acres, out of the 15.3 million acres of land stolen from Africans by the BSAC and other settlers.” (Madimu, 2018). Therefore, the economy of Southern Rhodesia in the early years of it being colonized by the British South Africa Company was based on two main drivers: gold mining, and the speculative land trading.

The decolonization process in Zimbabwe was a long, tumultuous one. As opposed to some other African countries that gained independence as early as the 1960s, Zimbabwe only became a nation-state under its current name in 1980. While the roots of decolonization in Southern Rhodesia have been planted in the 1960s, the process was largely more complicated than in the case of other African states due to the white settlers’ rule in Southern Rhodesia. David F. Gordon writes on the process of Zimbabwe breaking away from colonial rule and the specifics of this process at length in “Decolonization and Development in Kenya and Zimbabwe: A Comparative Analysis.” In the text, it is pointed out that “the settlers in Zimbabwe (then Southern Rhodesia) gained effective control over state power in 1923.” This was not the case in other countries, such as Kenya, where the British government ruled uncontested by the settlers all the way until the country regained formal independence in 1963 (Gordon, 1981).

Although Southern Rhodesia was self-governed since 1923, it formally remained a British territory until the issuance of Southern Rhodesia’s Unilateral Declaration of Independence in 1965 under then-Prime Minister of the country, Ian Smith. The declaration was not recognized by the British government, which urged the international community to impose sanctions on the breakaway colony. Despite pressure from the United Kingdom, states such as Portugal or South Africa, among others, continued to engage in trade with Rhodesia. Almost immediately after Ian Smith’s government declared independence, the Zimbabwe African National Union led by Ndabaningi Sithole and Robert Mugabe and Zimbabwe African People’s Union under the leadership of Joseph Nkomo declared themselves breakaway governments, giving rise to the violent Rhodesian Bush War, which lasted for 15 years, until 1979 (Holt, 2015).

The rise of conflict in the self-declared Republic of Rhodesia was unsurprising. Zimbabwe’s agriculture sector was dominated by white farmers, who received preferential treatment and were given over half of the country’s cultivable land and nearly all of its high-quality, arable land (Gordon, 1981). In war-torn post-1965 Rhodesia, the African population struggled with land shortage and overpopulation, which rendered the native inhabitants on the land unable to meet their basic needs, becoming reliant on trading with the white settlers who had access to most of the country's arable land, and by extension, its food resources. In relation to that, Gordon writes that Zimbabwe's inhabitants "exhibited a greater degree of 'internal' dependence upon white settlers," a dependence which shaped the country's challenges and struggles after gaining sovereignty in 1980 (Gordon, 1981).

Zimbabwe and the Belt and Road Initiative

Before going over the concrete activities carried out as part of the Belt and Road Initiative, it is imperative to identify the key goals of the initiative in Africa. As previously stated in the literature review section, the overarching ambition of the BRI is reviving the country's economic growth, which has stagnated in recent years, as well as boosting the economy of the PRC's Western regions (Ganda, 2020).

As stated in the official document treating on the vision of the Belt and Road Initiative, the project "aims to promote the connectivity of Asian, European and African continents and their adjacent seas, establish and strengthen partnerships among the countries along the Belt and Road, set up all-dimensional, multi-tiered and composite connectivity networks, and realize diversified, independent, balanced and sustainable development in these countries." The document goes on to identify further goals, such as tapping market potential in regions that are part of the initiative and creating "demands and job opportunities" (Vision, 2018).

When it comes to the African dimension of the initiative, it is difficult to speak of any stated "goals." Nonetheless, there have been declarations made by the Chinese side, that shine some light on the motivations behind BRI activity in that part of the world. In the "Forum on China-Africa Cooperation Beijing Action Plan (2019-2021)", released in 2018, the initiative is briefly mentioned at the beginning of the document, as a way to "strengthen multi-dimensional, wide-ranging, and in-depth cooperation for mutual benefits and common development." In that same document, "fifty security assistance programs to advance China-Africa cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative" were also announced (Forum, 2018).

Most official Chinese statements on the BRI in Africa were similarly vague as far as the goals are concerned, but a distinct focus on transport infrastructure development can be inferred from some of the communications originating from Chinese officials. In a statement from December 2021, the Chinese Ambassador to the African Union, Liu Yuxi, claimed that "BRI cooperation pursues development," before going on to list out some of the initiative's major successes, all of which were transport infrastructure projects, such as the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway or the No. 1 National Highway of the Republic of Congo (Liu, 2021).

With infrastructure development being the main focus of the Belt and Road Initiative, what does China hope to gain from its investments in this area? It can be explained by the need to remove and overcome "infrastructure bottlenecks" in Africa, which are a significant factor that slows down trade and connectivity, and make trading more expensive (Lin & Wang, 2017). The notion of "patient capital" is also used by scholars to explain China's motivation behind their rampant investments in transport infrastructure. It is argued that institutions such as the AIIB and the Silk Road Fund (both major sources of capital for the Belt and Road Initiative and development aid to African countries) invest in projects that are long-term oriented, "patient capital" undertakings that take ten years or longer to see any profit or intended results, with transport infrastructure projects in Africa being cited as prime examples of this idea (Lin & Wang, 2017b).

Zimbabwe formally joined the Belt and Road Initiative in 2018, as one of the sixty-one countries who signed onto it following the incorporation of the project into the constitution of the PRC towards the end of 2017 (Sacks, 2021). Since then, hundreds of millions of dollars have been poured into various infrastructure projects in Zimbabwe as part of the BRI, on top of the existing investments that took place since the adoption of the "Look East" policy in 2003. Some of the most notable ones include the upgrade of the Harare Robert Mugabe International Airport by China Jiangsu International, and the renovation of the Victoria Falls International Airport by that same company, which was completed in 2016 (Xinhua News Agency, 2019). For both of these projects, the China Exim Bank has provided \$303 million dollars of financing (Tonderai et al., 2021).

Significant investments have also been made by Chinese firms in the energy infrastructure sector of Zimbabwe. The hydropower-focused, state-owned company Sinohydro was involved in a number of projects in the country. In 2018, they completed the construction of two additional generators at the Kariba South Hydro Power Station. The combined worth of the project was $550 million dollars, with the majority of it being financed by the China Exim Bank, and the rest by the Zimbabwean Treasury (Xinhua News Agency, 2019). The same company is also reported to start work on building four new sewage treatment plants and upgrade the existing ones in the capital city of Harare, as well as upgrade the biggest power plant in Zimbabwe, the Hwange Thermal Power Station. The combined worth of these two projects is $1,727 billion dollars (Xinhua News Agency, 2019).

Chinese sources claim that the infrastructure projects and investments made under the guise of the Belt and Road Initiative create jobs and contribute to the well-being of the Zimbabwean population. While jobs may have been created, numerous reports point to the unfair treatment and workers' rights abuses at the sites of the largest Chinese investments. In October 2021, New Zimbabwe, an independent local news outlet reported on a workers' strike at the Hwange Thermal Power Station. Zimbabwean workers have ceased their operations, demanding that they be paid in U.S. dollars like their Chinese national counterparts, instead of Zimbabwe dollars, which rapidly decrease in value due to high inflation. The workers who complained about being underpaid and threatened to go on strike were promptly dismissed by the Chinese employers with no severance payments (New Zimbabwe, 2021).

Chinese-run construction sites have been accused of mistreating their Zimbabwean employees on multiple occasions. Workers tend to be paid not for the hours they've committed, but on the "amount of work accomplished." They are also denied the right to organize and bargain collectively as part of a trade union or go on paid leave. African employees at Chinese sites in Zimbabwe were also often forced to work overtime without adequate overtime pay or any pay whatsoever. Their remuneration was also found to be much lower than that of their Chinese counterparts, with similar skills and job experience. All of the above examples are in clear violation of Zimbabwean labor laws (Chipaike & Marufu, 2020). Safety regulations have also been reported to be disregarded by Chinese employers, mainly companies not providing construction workers access to personal protective equipment and instead making them pay for it out of pocket (Chipaike & Marufu, 2020).

The ongoing and completed infrastructure projects financed by Chinese companies in Zimbabwe undoubtedly have the potential to improve the lives of the Zimbabwean population. Projects such as airport renovations and upgrading hydro power plants can boost tourism, improve the capacity of the country's power grid, as well as create thousands of new jobs, both during construction and after the project is finished. However, in these jobs lies the crux of the issue: according to numerous reports and papers, Zimbabwean workers are regularly being mistreated by Chinese employers by being made to work in dangerous conditions, and underpaid in comparison to their Chinese counterparts. Companies hailing from the PRC also notoriously disregard Zimbabwean labor law with the low wages that are paid out, as well as preventing the workers from unionizing, and dismissing those who raise concerns with no severance pay.

Natural Resources and Investments

Chinese investments in Zimbabwe's natural resources sector have been a topic of interest and scrutiny in recent years. Zimbabwe is a country rich in natural resources, with vast mineral deposits such as coal, gold, diamonds, and iron ore. The country is also a significant global producer of tobacco and has fertile land suitable for agriculture. The Chinese government has recognized Zimbabwe's potential in the natural resources sector and has made significant investments in the country.

Chinese investments in Zimbabwe's natural resources sector have been characterized by joint ventures with Zimbabwean companies, as well as direct investments in mines and associated infrastructure. These investments have had a significant impact on the Zimbabwean economy and society, creating job opportunities and contributing to economic growth. In addition, these investments have helped to strengthen China-Zimbabwe relations, which have been characterized by mutual assistance and cooperation.

However, these investments have not been without controversy. There have been concerns about the environmental impact of mining activities, as well as the exploitation of workers and human rights violations. Some critics have also argued that these investments have mainly benefited China, rather than Zimbabwe, leading to a debate about the true nature of the China-Zimbabwe partnership.

In this section, we will provide an overview of Chinese investments in Zimbabwe's natural resources sector, including the types of investments made, the scale of investment, and their impact on the Zimbabwean economy and society. We will also explore the challenges and controversies associated with these investments, and their implications for China-Zimbabwe relations. By doing so, we aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex relationship between China and Zimbabwe, and shed light on the role of natural resources in shaping this relationship.

The Zimbabwe Investment Authority Act (Chapter 14:30) is a piece of legislation designed to promote investment in Zimbabwe by both local and foreign companies. The act also encourages joint ventures between foreign and national investors (Mapaure, C. 2014). This legal framework provides an attractive investment environment for foreign companies interested in doing business in Zimbabwe. The Zimbabwean government has been keen to attract foreign investment to stimulate economic growth and development. The Investment Authority Act is one of the key instruments used to achieve this objective. Due to the fact that the Zimbabwean economy is largely based on agriculture and mining, the mining sector, in particular, is a significant contributor to the country's GDP. One of the leading investors in Zimbabwe's mining sector is China.

Diamond Industry - Anjin Investments

Anjin Investments (Pvt) Ltd, a Chinese company, is currently the largest mining corporation in Zimbabwe by output and one of the world's biggest diamond producers. Anjin Investments (Private) Ltd is a joint venture company in Zimbabwe that was established on December 24, 2009, by two partners: Anhui Foreign Economic Construction (Group) Co. Ltd (AFECC), a Chinese investor, and Matt Bronze Enterprises (Pvt) Ltd, a Zimbabwean company formed by Zimbabwe's defense ministry and the Zimbabwe Defence Forces. Both companies hold a 50% stake in the joint venture. The Zimbabwean partner contributed the Special Grant for mining as investment, while the Chinese partner provided capital. The Chinese investor, Anhui Foreign Economic Construction (Group) Co. Ltd, claims to have invested approximately 380 million US Dollars in developing the mine and relocating villagers to a new resettlement at the ADDA Transau estate by August 2011 (Kimberley Process, 2011).

According to a parliamentary report on record, Anjin Investments, a diamond mining company operating in Zimbabwe, produced approximately 9 million carats of diamonds between 2010 and 2015, which generated around $332 million USD in revenue. The company made significant contributions to the Zimbabwean economy during this period, with the government receiving $62 million USD in royalties, and $86 million USD allocated towards corporate social responsibility initiatives. Despite these contributions, concerns have been raised regarding Anjin Investments' military ties, with reports indicating that the company was involved in the construction of a defense college at a cost of $98 million USD. However, in 2016, the government of former President Robert Mugabe intervened by suspending the diamond mining activities of Anjin Investments and other companies operating in the area. The reason behind this move was allegations that these companies had not been remitting taxes as required (Chimhangwa, 2019).

What is more, according to Nehanda Radio, workers at Anjin Diamond Company are alleging racial discrimination, claiming that Chinese and Zimbabwean nationals performing the same job receive vastly different salaries. Chinese dump truck operators reportedly earn $1800 per month, while their Zimbabwean counterparts receive only $300 per month. In addition to these pay disparities, miners employed by Chinese-owned companies have reported poor health and safety standards that may result in serious health complications. These concerns include inadequate ventilation, a failure to replace damaged protective equipment, and threats of termination directed at workers who refuse to work in unsafe conditions underground. Some Anjin employees have alleged that Chinese managers bribe or threaten miners to prevent them from reporting accidents or other issues to the Mines Safety Department (Nehanda Radio, 2015).

Anjin Diamond Company also had to deal with a number of employee strikes. Strikes occurred for various reasons, including low pay, poor working conditions, or a lack of benefits. For instance, in August 2012, a significant event occurred. Around 1,500 workers had taken part in a strike, which was deemed illegal by the labor court. The workers were advocating for improved pay and better working conditions. It was the eighth time they had gone on strike in just two years. In response to the illegal strike, Anjin Investments proceeded to terminate the workers' employment which resulted in the order to leave company housing. If the workers wished to continue working at the mine, they were required to reapply for their positions. This event had significant implications for the workers, who were left without jobs and housing, and underscores the complex labor issues that can arise in the mining industry (Industriall, 2012). Another issue faced by former Anjin employees is the non-payment of termination benefits owed to them. As reported by News Day, 127 former employees are owed a total of $407,442 in termination benefits, but they will not be receiving their payments anytime soon. Their application has been removed from the roll at the High Court pending Anjin's Constitutional Court challenge against the State (NewsDay, 2017).

These allegations against Anjin Investments raise concerns about the company's treatment of its workers. The mistreatment of employees, coupled with racial discrimination and poor health and safety standards, suggests a disregard for human rights and a lack of corporate social responsibility.

Lithium Industry

Over the past two years, the demand for lithium, a vital component in the production of green energy, has skyrocketed. It resulted in record-high prices. The global supply of lithium has not been able to keep up with this rapidly increasing demand. Zimbabwe has emerged as the fifth-largest producer of lithium in the world. In an effort to increase domestic processing capacity and benefit from the growing demand for lithium, Zimbabwe's government, under President Emmerson Mnangagwa, has imposed strict regulations on the export of unprocessed lithium. The ban, which was enacted in December 2022, aims to prevent unregulated artisanal miners from extracting lithium and taking it across the border. Those who wish to export raw lithium ore must now obtain written permission from the government and provide evidence of exceptional circumstances. Moreover, the government has introduced new rules that require a 5% royalty rate to be paid on lithium starting in January (Mitchell, 2023). This payment will be split equally between cash and processed final products instead of ore. This approach is designed to enable Zimbabwe to accumulate physical reserves of precious metals and minerals for the first time, while still receiving cash for day-to-day government operations. It may also be used to support government borrowing.

By enforcing these measures, the government hopes to create more employment opportunities and economic growth within the country. The move is expected to stimulate the local lithium industry by encouraging the establishment of lithium processing plants, which will increase the value of the mineral before it is exported. This policy shift is expected to enable the country to capitalize on its vast lithium reserves by keeping the value-add within its borders

(Mitchell, 2023).

In recent years, Chinese companies including Sinomine Resource Group, Zhejiang Huayou Cobalt, and Chengxin Lithium Group have invested heavily in Zimbabwe's lithium sector, with a total combined investment of $678 million in acquiring mines and projects. These companies are currently at various stages of development in their respective lithium mining operations. Moreover, Chengxin Lithium Group and Zhejiang Huayou Cobalt are also constructing processing facilities, which would exempt them from the government's ban on unprocessed lithium exports. This strategic move by these companies is indicative of their long-term investment goals in Zimbabwe's lithium sector. There are opinions that the establishment of this ban could potentially enhance the relationship between Zimbabwe and China, as China has been prepared for this move. It may now emerge a dominant player in the country's lithium mining industry (Mitchell, 2023).

Zimbabwe has become a key target for foreign companies looking to tap into its vast lithium deposits. Ireland, Belgium, the UK, and Australia are among the nations that have expressed an interest in mining lithium in Zimbabwe. However, some of these companies have been bought by Chinese tech giants, which are seeking to increase their dominance in the global lithium market.

One of the best examples of Chinese dominance of the lithium mining market in Zimbabwe is the Bikita minerals mine. Sinomine Resource Group of China unveiled its project to construct a factory and expand mining operations at the Bikita lithium mine in Zimbabwe, for a total investment of $200 million. In 2022, Sinomine Resource Group acquired 100% ownership of the Bikita mine, which has significant lithium mineral resources estimated at 54.515 million metric tonnes in the east and west, corresponding to 1.5605 million metric tonnes of lithium carbonate equivalent (LCE) (SMM, 2023). The company aims to enhance its mining and processing capacity to produce more lithium concentrate by expanding its operations. The project is anticipated to increase the annual output to 412,000 metric tonnes of lithium concentrate. The Bikita mine is one of Zimbabwe's largest lithium mines, and Sinomine Resource Group's acquisition and expansion plans show their commitment to developing Zimbabwe's lithium industry while securing China's supply chain of this essential mineral.

The Bikita mine in Zimbabwe has been subject to significant criticism and opposition from local communities. Zimbabwe's Financial Gazette reports that there are growing tensions between the residents and the Bikita Mineral company that manages the mine. The community is accusing the company of violating the Mines and Minerals Act, specifically on environmental issues. According to the locals, the mine's activities have resulted in polluted rivers that have deprived them of clean water. Furthermore, the mine dumps of quarry dust have created artificial hills, which have replaced the original landscape that was once full of vegetation. Now, the area appears barren, with only small patches of grass and low bush breaking the monotony of the desolate terrain (Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, 2019).

Similar to the mining of gold and diamonds, lithium extraction is becoming a source of violence in several regions across Zimbabwe, including Bikita. Small-scale miners are clashing with larger lithium mining companies, including those affiliated with China, resulting in bloody conflicts. Despite concerns about the potential for violence surrounding lithium mining in Zimbabwe, Stephen Chan, a professor of World Politics at the University of London, believes that the Chinese presence in the country's lithium industry could actually help maintain orderliness. He suggests that the Chinese companies, which have a reputation for their efficiency and organization, could help to regulate the mining process and prevent conflicts from escalating (Matishe, 2023).

What is more, China Natural Resources has revealed its latest acquisition of Williams Minerals, the operator of a lithium mine located in Zimbabwe. Feishang Group and Top Pacific (China) were the previous holders of the interests in Williams Minerals, but the agreement stipulates that China Natural Resources will indirectly acquire all interests in Williams Minerals during the second quarter of this fiscal year. The company's ownership of the Zimbabwean lithium mine will gradually vest cumulatively, region by region, from 2024 through 2026. This acquisition is a significant development in the growing demand for lithium, which is a vital component in batteries used in electric vehicles and other electronic devices. Zimbabwe has one of the largest lithium reserves in Africa, making China Natural Resources' acquisition of Williams Minerals a crucial investment in this market. As a result, the move is expected to give the company a valuable foothold in the industry. As Mr. Wong Wah On Edward, Chairman of the Company "Lithium has become one of the most sought-after and highest appreciating minerals given its proven power advantages. At the same time, there is a significant supply shortage, which puts an even greater value on asset owners and mines. We hope to be able to leverage our mining expertise, sales and distribution platforms and balance sheet, as we continue to execute on our long-term business strategy." (China Natural Resources, 2023). The demand for lithium is expected to continue to rise as the world shifts toward renewable energy and electric vehicles. It may also contribute to the growth of Zimbabwe's economy by creating more employment opportunities, particularly in the mining industry (Mining Technology, 2023).

"Debt-Trap" Diplomacy

The concept of "debt-trap" diplomacy has been brought up on multiple occasions in relation to China's financial aid to developing countries and its consequences. This idea is heavily debated in scholarly circles, with some publications considering it to be a very real phenomenon, whereas others are doubtful of the notion that China is "debt-trapping" developing countries to unethically gain leverage. Many consider it to have arisen from Western narratives that look at the Chinese involvement in Africa purely from the perspective of great-power competitions, claiming that the "debt-trap" diplomacy concept is borne out of negativity bias towards China's investments and projects in the developing world that threaten the Western-led financial instruments specializing in development aid (Brautigam, 2020).

On the opposite side of the discussion are scholars who point toward the cases of China's loans to Sri Lanka aimed to facilitate the construction of strategic infrastructure. The case that has most frequently been brought up as a textbook example of "debt-trap" diplomacy was the construction and subsequent leasing out of the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka. Between 2010 and 2015, China lent $4.8 billion dollars to Sri Lanka for the construction of a number of infrastructure projects that included railways, airports, and power plants, with the most expensive flagship project being the Hambantota port (Wibisono, 2019). However, the loan has proven to be too large for Sri Lanka's budget, and with the new investments not turning out to be as profitable as expected, the country defaulted on the debt. In 2017, the two nations agreed on a deal that entailed handing over effective control of the port to the state-owned China Merchants Port Holdings by leasing a 70% stake for a period of 99 years (Al Jazeera, 2017).

In order to assess whether or not Zimbabwe is at risk of falling prey to a Chinese "debt-trap," it is crucial to estimate the total value of loans made by Chinese institutions to the country, particularly those that finance transport infrastructure and other strategic sites. When assessing these as potential strategic vulnerabilities, the main focus will be the strategic value of these investments to China, i.e. "potential port or base/airfield access, or valuable natural resources," as well as how the debt would pan out in the long-term: its total value, Zimbabwe's ability to pay it off, as well as the "magnitude and financial viability of the project" (Parker, 2018).

The total value of Zimbabwe's domestic and external debts is estimated at $19 billion dollars, and the ratio of the total value of the country's public debt to its gross domestic products is 50.9, whereas the threshold listed by the Low-Income Country DSA is 35, putting the country at major risk of defaulting on its debts (Nyathi, 2022). The World Bank has already listed Zimbabwe as being in external debt distress (World Bank, 2022). Out of the total debt value, $3 billion dollars that China lent to Zimbabwe is of particular interest to this paper, seeing as these loans pertain to the construction of major critical infrastructure projects that include $988 million dollars for the expansion of the Hwange power plant (mentioned earlier in this paper), $360 million dollars for the Kariba South Bank hydropower project, as well as $219 million dollars for upgrading NetOne, a state-owned telecommunications company (Brautigam et al., 2020).

The aforementioned infrastructure projects have the potential for becoming "debt-traps" for Zimbabwe, especially when one considers that the country has already defaulted on a number of loans provided by the China Exim Bank and was granted repayment extension (Brautigam et al. 2020). What complicates the situation even further is the fact that Zimbabwe was recently accused by China of "understating" the financial support it receives from the PRC. In 2019, Zimbabwe's finance ministry released a budget statement that claimed China was responsible for only $3.6 million dollars of support loans in the period between January and September of that year. The Chinese embassy quickly responded by saying that in its records, the total value of bilateral support loans amounted to $136.8 million dollars (Al Jazeera, 2019).

Taking into account the total loan value, the multiple times Zimbabwe has already defaulted on Chinese loans, and the conflicting public statements from both countries' officials, it can be said that the loans extended to Zimbabwe by China and its external debt distress create the perfect conditions for a "debt-trap" understood as the possibility of the PRC seizing total or partial control of the Harare's strategic assets. In 2018, when Zimbabwe's total external debt amounted to $18 billion dollars, Chinese money accounted for 34% of that value (Al-Fadhat & Prasetio, 2022). With the country's debts far exceeding its annual GDP numbers, it is growing increasingly dependent on foreign funding to facilitate economic growth and infrastructure improvements, with the lion's share of that funding coming from the People's Republic of China. Harare has also adopted the Chinese yuan as legal tender in 2016 in response to China canceling $40 million dollars of debt (The Guardian, 2015), and included it in its basket of reserve currencies in 2014 (Mukeredzi, 2014), granting China even more influence over Zimbabwe's finances.

With China Exim Bank funding the projects and Chinese companies like Sinohydro and China Jiangsu International carrying out the work on constructing and upgrading Zimbabwe's strategically important infrastructure, such as the Harare Robert Mugabe International Airport or the Hwange power plant, the PRC already does have leverage in potential debt negotiations with Zimbabwe. The possibility exists for the Chinese government to use these investments in order to negotiate deals as a result of which China would get majority control over these projects. The Sinomine Resource Group already having acquired 100% ownership of the Bikita lithium mine, it can be argued that this is already happening. In contrast to the Hambantota port case in Sri Lanka, there is no time-limited lease agreement, with China instead buying up majority stakes in these critical projects with the full knowledge and approval of Zimbabwe's current government. While as of this moment, the PRC is being lenient towards Zimbabwe with its loan terms, frequently granting repayment extensions, the possibility of leveraging Harare's massive debt to acquire control of desirable infrastructure is, indeed, on the table.

Critics of the "debt-trap" concept as it pertains to China's economic ties to Africa point towards the fact that this argument is derived from the fact that China's approach to commerce and financial aid deviates from the Western norms, but they simultaneously admit that the growing economic influence of the PRC on the continent leads to increasing dependence on Chinese capital (Carmody, 2020). The purpose of this thesis, as well as this particular section of it, is not to determine whether or not China's lending to Africa is a careful strategy aimed at the entrapment of Zimbabwe (and other African nations) through debt. Indeed, a lot of research points towards the fact that the "debt-trap" diplomacy narrative is at least partially motivated by the research agendas of scholars who place the Sino-African relationship in the wider context of the competition between China and the West without critically looking at the Western financial aid programs (Lai et al., 2020). Regardless of the nomenclature, though, the fact remains that the sheer volume of Chinese loans, Zimbabwe's external debt distress, and the overwhelming involvement of China's firms in the construction and upgrading of the country's critical infrastructure does place the PRC as the main beneficiary of this relationship through increasing Harare's dependence on Beijing's incoming stream of capital.

"Look East" policy

The "Look East" Policy (LEP) was launched by the Zimbabwean government in 2003, as a means of strengthening bilateral ties with China and other countries in Asia (Ojakorotu & Kamidza, 2018). The LEP was introduced in response to Zimbabwe's deteriorating economic and political instability, as well as its strained relationships with Western governments and international development partners, such as donors and global financial institutions.

The policy was adopted by the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front government as a way to counteract the impact of Western-imposed sanctions. The sanctions had been put in place due to concerns about suppression of democracy in the country, leading to Zimbabwe's exclusion from Western-led global dialogue.

The LEP was seen as a strategic move to strengthen the country's economic and political position by forming alliances with Asian countries, particularly China. This partnership was seen as an opportunity for Zimbabwe to access new markets and secure investments.

Since the introduction of the LEP, Zimbabwe has been able to establish strong ties with China. Chinese companies started investing in the country's infrastructure, mining, and agriculture sectors. Despite the economic benefits of the LEP, there have been concerns about the impact of Chinese investment on the country's local industries and communities. Chinese companies have been accused of exploiting Zimbabwe's natural resources, such as lithium, and engaging in environmentally damaging practices. Additionally, there have been reports of human rights violations and labor abuses at Chinese-owned companies operating in Zimbabwe (Youde, 2007).

The “Look East” Policy resulted in righting the cooperation between Zimbabwe and China. It has resulted in numerous benefits for both countries.

Benefits for Zimbabwe

1) Diplomatic support

The example for this may be the fact that China has played a role in supporting Zimbabwe on the global platform in 2008, when The United States had put forth a proposal to impose targeted sanctions on the regime of Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe through the United Nations. China used its veto power to block the proposal for the implementation. As the US Ambassador to the UN Zalmay Khalilzad commented “China and Russia have stood with Mugabe against the people of Zimbabwe" (France24, 2008).

2) Financing infrastructure projects

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations, China has been providing Zimbabwe with assistance in the form of infrastructure development. This includes the construction of Harare stadium, hospitals, dams, school dormitories, wells, and clothing factories (Embassy of The People' Republic of China in the Republic of Zimbabwe, 2004). In 2012, the government of Zimbabwe announced that it had secured a $1.2 billion investment from China Railway to develop a high-speed train route between the cities of Harare and Bulawayo (The Business Report, n.d.). In 2016, Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe officially inaugurated the upgraded Victoria Falls International Airport. The airport, which was built with support from China, is a major achievement for the country's development efforts, with President Mugabe referring to China as "a great partner and friend". The expansion of the airport began in 2013 and was completed by China Jiangsu International, who financed the project through a $150 million loan from the China Export Import Bank (The State Council of The People’s Republic of China, 2016). In 2022 China gifted the country with a grand six-story parliament building in Mt. Hampden, located roughly 11 miles from the capital city, Harare. The building was constructed at a cost of $200 million, and was fully funded by the Chinese government. This impressive structure is a clear indication of China's support for Zimbabwe, and highlights the deepening ties between the two nations (South China Morning Post, 2022). These are only the examples of the projects, and China invests in a lot more.

3) Education and training

China has been providing scholarships to Zimbabwean students for many years. There are many programmes that enable many students to access quality education in China but also to achieve their educational goals in Zimbabwe. The scholarships often cover tuition fees, accommodation, and living allowances. China provides these scholarships as part of its commitment to enhancing educational cooperation and exchange with Zimbabwe. Examples of the scholarship may be: China-Zimbabwe Friendship Scholarship, which is a scholarship program in 2020 to support local students' educational pursuits launched by The Chinese Embassy in Zimbabwe, through the China-Zimbabwe Exchange Center (CZEC) - a non-profit organization committed to promoting cultural and economic exchanges between China and Zimbabwe. The scholarships are funded by the Chinese community in Zimbabwe, demonstrating their commitment to corporate social responsibility and giving back to the local community (Xinhua News Agency, 2023).

Benefits for China

1) Access to natural resources

Zimbabwe is a country that is rich in valuable natural resources that have only gained in relevance in recent years, lithium being the most prominent example of such a resource. Since the implementation of the "Look East" policy and the ramping up of Zimbabwe's efforts to attract Chinese investment, the PRC has been actively pursuing opportunities in the mining sector of the Zimbabwean economy. Chinese companies got involved in Zimbabwean mines as early as 2003, with the announcement of the Shanghai Baosteel Group looking to invest $300 million dollars into Zimbabwe's mining and metallurgy industries. Initially, China's focus was on the following materials: platinum, steel, iron, and chrome. It later expanded to cover diamonds. The ZANU-PF party was also reported to have engaged in exporting its minerals to China in exchange for weapons (Africa Confidential, 2013). In the first ten years of the "Look East" policy, substantial investments were also made in the telecommunications, retail, and agriculture industries (Alao, 2014).

The recent acquisition of a 100% stake in the Bikita lithium mine is the latest example of how the People's Republic of China continues to secure its strategic need for natural resources by heavily investing in Zimbabwe. The case of the Bikita mine was discussed at length in the earlier section of this paper.

2) New market for Chinese goods

The adoption of the "Look East" policy presented a major opportunity for China to increase its exports to Zimbabwe. According to the Observatory of Economic Complexity, the annualized rate of exports from China to Zimbabwe between 1995 and 2021 was 14.3%. In 1996, China's exports to the African nation were worth $30.9 million dollars, whereas the total value of Chinese exports to Zimbabwe for 2021 alone was $992 million dollars. Zimbabwe also exported to China heavily, having sold $537 million dollars' worth of goods in 2021 (OEC, 2023).

While these numbers paint a picture of mutually beneficial trade cooperation, a more nuanced perspective can be reached by looking at the types of goods the countries export to each other. As of February 2023, the majority of China's exports to Zimbabwe consisted of pharmaceutical goods (vaccines, antisera, toxins, and cultures), semiconductor devices and electrical transformers (i.e. electronic parts), iron structures, and rubber tires. For comparison, the PRC's main imports from Zimbabwe for February 2023 consisted almost exclusively of raw materials: ferroalloys, raw tobacco, chromium ore, and nickel ore (OEC, 2023).

3) Political influence

The "Look East" policy was not borne out of choice, but necessity. The sanctions imposed by Western nations on Robert Mugabe's regime effectively barred Zimbabwe from receiving aid from international organizations such as the IMF. The decision to turn eastward was, therefore, motivated in equal parts by the dire economic situation of the country which was brought upon by the actions of the ruling regime. As Zimbabwe's largest source of investment, China enjoys preferential treatment when it comes to economic matters in the country.

The PRC's activity in Zimbabwe has called many to question the Chinese government's role in Zimbabwe's political affairs. In 2017, following the coup d'etat in Zimbabwe, as a result of which the long-time ruler Robert Mugabe was ousted from power, reports circulated suggesting that China was forewarned about the takeover by General Constantino Chiwenga, who was in charge of the country's military at the time and is now the vice-president. The previous year, Beijing made it publicly known that it was "growing frustrated" with Mugabe's rule, by denying continued financial aid until the ZANU-PF leader "put in place a succession plan and committed to clearing arrears with debtors." China denied the rumors of any foreknowledge of the coup d'etat, accusing Western media of trying to sour relations between Beijing and Harare (Cotterill, 2017).

The PRC also enables itself to attain political leverage through its multiple investments in Zimbabwe, especially when it comes to the telecommunications industry. Zimbabwe's telecommunications are dominated by the Chinese giant Huawei. The company was the leading contractor in upgrading Zimbabwe's mobile network infrastructure, as well as in carrying out work for the National Broad Band Project, and constructing the supercomputer center at the University of Zimbabwe (AFRODAD, 2019). Chinese tech conglomerates are also involved in helping Zimbabwe's government grow and develop surveillance apparatuses, not only enabling Harare to spy on its own citizens, but also granting Beijing access to their data, as well (Munoriyarwa & Chumbu, 2022).

7. Case Study Analysis

The investigation into the economic relationship between China and Zimbabwe in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative, natural resources exploitation, the concept of "debt-trap" diplomacy, and Zimbabwe's "Look East" policy has provided us with numerous examples that can be used to effectively formulate an answer to this paper's research question. In the following sections, we will dissect the findings of our research using the theoretical perspectives of the dependency theory and the theory of structural functionalism.

Is China's economic involvement in Zimbabwe exploitative?

Our analysis of China's economic involvement in Zimbabwe will weigh the investments in Zimbabwean infrastructure that were part of our case study against those made into the mining and natural resources sector. The upgrades and renovations made to airports and power plants in Zimbabwe provide tangible benefits to the country's population and economy, in terms of boosting mobility, tourism, and expanding the availability of power across the country. Chinese funding for the infrastructure projects was made in the form of loans from the China Exim Bank, with construction being carried out by state-owned construction companies. As we discussed at length in the case study, Chinese lending does provide leverage to the PRC in the context of Zimbabwe's external debt distress and paves way for the possible exertion of influence. In terms of the immediate impact of these projects, though, they are a net positive in terms of their contribution to the development of Zimbabwean infrastructure. Figure 1 compiles the information about the projects mentioned in our case study, their total cost, as well as how much of it was covered by Chinese funding.

Figure 1: Chinese-funded Infrastructure Projects

Project	China's investment	Total Project Cost	Sector
Harare Robert Mugabe International Airport	$153 million USD	$153 million USD	Transport
Victoria Falls International Airport	$150 million USD	$200 million USD	Transport
Hwange Thermal Power Station	$1.2 billion USD	$1.4 billion USD	Energy
Kariba South Hydro Power Station	$320 million USD	$533 million USD	Energy
Total Chinese investment value (in USD)	$1.823 billion USD		
Combined cost of projects	$2.286 billion USD		

As evidenced by Figure 1, 80% of the total cost of the infrastructure projects included in our case study was covered by loans from the Chinese Exim Bank, with the total value of the investment sitting at $1.823 billion dollars. Academic research shows that transport infrastructure investments are associated with lower travel and transport costs, time savings, increased gains from trade, and expanded production overall, all of which in turn contributes to higher total factor productivity and GDP growth (Lakshamanan, 2011). Investments in energy infrastructure, are linked with poverty alleviation and energy costs reduction, and coupled with improvements to transport infrastructure, their impact on poverty reduction is "greater than the sum of their individual effects" (Cook, 2005).

In the context of the dependency theory, the large Chinese contributions to the transport and energy infrastructure of Zimbabwe do not fall into the "core-periphery" dynamic of exploitation, seeing as these investments were not created with the purpose of extracting natural resources from the country to the benefit of China, and actually have the potential to improve the economic well-being of the Zimbabwean population.

There is much more to consider than the sheer dollar value of the infrastructure projects that China was involved in in Zimbabwe. When it comes to job creation, a spokesperson for the Chinese Embassy in Harare claimed that the People's Republic of China has contributed to creating "over 100,000 jobs" in the country across all of its projects and investments (Mutingwende, 2022). While job creation is universally perceived as an overall net benefit to society, it is important to consider the context surrounding the statement mentioned above. It was released in response to a press release issued by the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions in late October 2022, in which the organization highlighted a plethora of labor violation issues that have been taking place at Chinese establishments and called China's treatment of workers an "existential threat to the labor movement in Zimbabwe." The focus of the press release was on forcing employees to "work without adequate personal protective equipment (PPE)," as well as the lack of compensation for the families of workers who have been injured or killed "as a result of workplace hazards" (ZCTU, 2022).

To arrive at an accurate answer to the first part of our research question, it is necessary to weigh the Chinese contributions against the resources that Harare has provided to the PRC, including human resources, and finally, to assess what both countries have gained from the relationship so far. By utilizing the findings of our case study regarding China's involvement in the natural resource extraction sector in Zimbabwe, the assessment of recent trade data, and the information about how Zimbabwean workers are treated at Chinese establishments, we can obtain a clearer understanding of what each country has gained from and contributed to the relationship.

Figure 2: China-Zimbabwe infrastructure investments and export data

	China		Zimbabwe	
Selected infrastructure projects (financial contribution)	$1.823 billion USD		$463 million USD	
Total value of exports (in USD)	$992 million USD		$537 million USD	
Main exported products and value (in USD)	VBATC*	$84.2 million USD	Raw Tobacco	$280 million USD
	Stone Processing Machines	$41.8 million USD	Chromium Ore	$128 million USD
	Pesticides	$41.3 million USD	Nickel Ore	$70.6 million USD

*VBATC: Vaccines, blood, antisera, toxins and cultures

Figure 2 comprises our findings with regard to the trade between China and Zimbabwe, as well as the total value of the countries' respective investments into the infrastructure projects mentioned above. As has already been stated earlier in this section, China's investments in the Zimbabwean infrastructure sector can be considered ultimately beneficial and not exploitative when taken at face value, i.e. lowering transport costs, improving mobility, and potential poverty reduction. The export statistics were sourced from the Observatory of Economic Complexity and represent the most recent available set of data for a complete year – 2021. These numbers suggest that China recuperated roughly half the money it has invested in infrastructure through exports just in that single year, and the value of Zimbabwe's exports to China exceeded their investments in the projects that the PRC was involved in by $74 million USD. When looking at the main exports of each country, it becomes clear that China's top exports to Zimbabwe were Chinese-made products, such as stone-processing machinery and medical products, whereas Zimbabwe primarily exported raw materials and natural resources to the PRC. These numbers show the dependency theory's core-periphery dynamic at play: China takes valuable resources out of Zimbabwe, and exports mainly Chinese-manufactured goods back to the country, suggesting that China's activities in this African nation are, in fact, exploitative. This is also exacerbated by the evidence of the poor treatment of human resources by Chinese companies: our case study has found that the state-owned firms hailing from the PRC routinely underpay the Zimbabwean workers (with the salaries of Chinese employees being much higher), expose them to dangerous conditions without providing the necessary protective equipment, and fail to obey by Harare's labor regulations.

Is China's economic involvement in Zimbabwe mutually beneficial?

The question of whether or not the China-Zimbabwe economic relationship is mutually beneficial will be assessed through looking at the relationship and key benefits that both governments gain from the cooperation and the assessment of how China's activity impacts the different social structures in Zimbabwe, followed by the structural functionalist analysis of Zimbabwe's political system.

Political elites

One of the main beneficiaries of China's economic involvement in Zimbabwe are the country's elites, especially the political class, represented by Robert Mugabe and his regime until the coup d'etat that took place in 2017. Through implementing the "Look East" policy and obtaining funds from Chinese loans and investments, the Mugabe regime was able to bypass the sanctions imposed upon it by Western countries and remain in power – it has come to light that Chinese money has been dedicated not only to infrastructure, natural resources, and construction, but also to projects that directly benefited the proliferation of the Mugabe regime, such as censorship equipment used to stifle independent TV and radio stations, monitoring opposition politicians and their constituents ahead of elections, and even constructing a new presidential mansion (Will, 2013).

When it comes to the Chinese government, they are the direct drivers and beneficiaries of economic activity that China finances abroad. All of the Chinese organizations that are involved in carrying out construction, finance, and other types of work in Zimbabwe, which were mentioned in our case study, are state-owned enterprises. With the government being the "primary resource allocator in the [Chinese] economy" (Lin et al., 2020), all of the resources and financial profits that emerge out of the China-Zimbabwe economic relationship fall under the control of the Chinese Communist Party. Therefore, the cases of the Bikita lithium mine being fully controlled by the Sinomine Resource Group, or the preferential granting of licenses for extracting diamonds and other valuable resources to China (Will, 2013), can all be considered to directly benefit the Chinese government. Thus, as far as the social structure of the political elites is concerned, the economic relationship between China and Zimbabwe is, in fact, mutually beneficial; the Chinese Communist Party gains effective control over critical infrastructure in Zimbabwe, as evidenced by the case of the Bikita mine or the country's diamond industry, and the Zimbabwean regime was equipped with the tools to stay in power and evade the sanctions imposed upon them by Western governments.

Citizenry

Seeing as the theory of structural functionalism emerged from the field of sociology, it is particularly useful in terms of assessing the roles and impact of China's economic activity in Zimbabwe on the citizens of the country themselves. Our case study has revealed that Zimbabwean citizens who are employed by Chinese organizations are poorly treated and at times even discriminated against, especially when compared to their counterparts with Chinese citizenships. Zimbabwean workers are underpaid, with some reports claiming that Zimbabwean miners are paid as little as $35 dollars per month by Chinese enterprises (Chaudhury, 2021). Coupled with the unfair dismissals and dangerous working conditions without the provision of necessary personal protective equipment, it can be said that Zimbabwe's citizens are being taken advantage of, and through its reliance of China as one of the only sources of reliable financing, the Zimbabwean government has rid itself of most agency it had to counteract the Chinese firms' violations of the country's labor laws (Chipaike & Bischoff, 2019).

A survey carried out among citizens of Harare asking for their impressions of China shines a light on how the members of Zimbabwean society perceive China's involvement in their country. 98% of its respondents were of the opinion that the Zimbabwe-China relationship is "not mutually beneficial," and that China reaps most of the benefits overall. Some of the responses included statements that China is "dumping substandard goods into Zimbabwe," "Zimbabwean political elites benefit more [than the people]," and that China is "looting our resources" (Mano, 2016).

The information presented in our case study provides insights into the possible reasons for the sentiments of the Zimbabwean citizenry. On top of the already-mentioned violations of labor laws, the bulk of Chinese investments is concentrated in the mining and natural resources sector, where Chinese firms continue to acquire controlling stakes, which signals to the population that China's actions are oriented towards extracting their country's resources, offering little tangible benefits in exchange. This is also evidenced by the trade statistics showing that Zimbabwe's top exports to China consist of nearly exclusively raw materials and natural resources, whereas Beijing mainly exports Chinese-made goods to Zimbabwe.

Zimbabwe's Political System

Our interpretation of the information we have gathered in the case study has led us to the conclusion that the economic relationship between China and Zimbabwe is a one-sided one, albeit with significant benefits to the Zimbabwean political elites. The "Look East" policy enabled the Mugabe regime to stay in power, and the Chinese investments have, indeed, helped improve Zimbabwe's infrastructure. However, aside from the benefits of better transport and energy infrastructure, the Zimbabwean society in general does not seem to have felt the impact of these investments in a positive way as much as the political elites. The survey results we discussed in this section show that the people of Zimbabwe are highly skeptical of the benefits China is supposedly providing to their country, with many reporting that they feel Zimbabwe is being "looted" of its natural resources. As evidenced by the findings of our case study, the workers employed by Chinese firms were also discriminated against through underpaying, unlawful termination of contracts, and neglectful treatment of workers' unions and Zimbabwe's labor law.

An important part of the discussion around the issue of the Zimbabwe-China economic relationship are the conditions which enabled this one-sided exchange to take place. It is not enough to put the blame on China's economic might for this state of affairs – the root of it lies in Zimbabwe's political system and the elites who rule the country. In order to understand how these aforementioned conditions came to be, in an analysis of Zimbabwe's political system, we've used the structural functionalist Almond model, which allows for a universal assessment of any political system by looking at its input and output functions in particular countries and how they are carried out (Almond & Coleman, 2015). In the case of Zimbabwe, the input

In the constitution of the country, it is stated that Zimbabwe is a "unitary, democratic, and sovereign republic," (Zimbabwe Constitution, 2013) but in reality, the country's politics have been dominated by Robert Mugabe and the ZANU-PF party ever since it gained independence in 1980. As described in the literature section of this thesis and parts of our case study, the input functions of political socialization and recruitment, as well as interest articulation are controlled by ZANU-PF. While independent media and other agencies of political socialization do have a capacity to impact and formulate the political leanings and activities of individuals, they have little to no say with regard to actually recruiting them into the political system, unless through association with ZANU-PF. This, in turn affects the **interest articulation**, which is the process of creating common interest among a number of different, scattered interest groups (Almond & Coleman, 2015). With political socialization and recruitment being so dependent on ZANU-PF, the political interests and their prioritization in the political system are also articulated in a way that lies in the party's interest. **Interest aggregation** in Zimbabwe, at least in the context of its economic relations with the rest of the world, is also carried out with keeping the preservation of the ruling party as one of the top priorities. This is evidenced by the case of the "Look East" policy. Overburdened by sanctions imposed upon it by Western powers, the political elite decided to "look east" for the main sources of funding, inviting Chinese capital in the process. This broad policy decision that aggregates Zimbabwe's economic interests and pushes towards an alternative solution that shaped the country's economy in the following years was motivated by self-preservation from the perspective of ZANU-PF, as any other solution to Harare's dire economic circumstances would not have been possible with Robert Mugabe staying in power. Finally, **political communication** in Zimbabwe is also tightly controlled by ZANU-PF, especially in the conventional way, i.e. public opinion, press, and mass media. In the 2023 World Press Freedom Index, the country is placed at the 126th place out of 180 measured countries, with Reporters Without Borders noting that the "media situation in Zimbabwe has improved slightly since the dictator Robert Mugabe's ouster in 2017." (Reporters Without Borders, 2023). Almond also distinguishes another form of political communication in his work, though, namely the maintaining of boundaries between political and non-political issues. In the case of Zimbabwe's economic relationship with the People's Republic of China, the fact that ZANU-PF has become ostracized on the international stage has given the non-political issue of the country's economic development a political dimension. This provided China with the opportunity to enter Zimbabwe with extensive investments and lending which allowed them to become a crucial player in the country's economy, primarily the natural resources sector.

8. Discussion

The aim of this thesis is to examine the case of Zimbabwe in the context of Chinese help and investments in Africa and address the research question: "Is China's economic involvement in Zimbabwe exploitative or mutually beneficial?" This study seeks to shed light on the nature and impact of China's economic engagement with Zimbabwe, exploring whether it primarily benefits China at the expense of Zimbabwe or if it establishes a mutually advantageous relationship.

China's active presence and significant investments in Zimbabwe have been a focal point of our case study. In examining China's economic involvement in Zimbabwe, we paid particular attention to two key aspects: the Belt and Road Initiative and Chinese investments in the country. Additionally, we considered Zimbabwe's Look East Policy, which aimed to foster closer relations with China, and the concept of China-Debt-Trap Diplomacy put forth by scholars.To answer our research question regarding China's economic involvement in Zimbabwe, we utilized two theories: Dependency Theory and Structural Functionalism. Dependency Theory examines power dynamics and potential exploitation between developed and developing countries. We applied this theory to analyze whether Zimbabwe's economic engagement with China exhibits signs of dependency and exploitation. Structural Functionalism focuses on the interdependence of different societal components and their contribution to stability. We used this theory to understand the benefits and impacts of China's investments in Zimbabwe, particularly in terms of economic stability and societal functioning. By employing these theories, we aimed to provide a comprehensive analysis of the case study.

In addition to the theories mentioned earlier, another theory that can be considered is the World-System Theory, developed by Immanuel Wallerstein. However, it is important to note that the application of this theory may have limitations in the context of Zimbabwe's relationship with China. According to the World-System Theory, countries are categorized into core, periphery, and semi-periphery regions based on their level of economic development and dominance. Semi-periphery regions are considered to play a significant role in mediating economic, political, and social activities between the core and peripheral areas and China is considered as semi-periphery (Li, 2021). However, in the case of Zimbabwe and its relationship with China, we think that China should be considered more as a core. As the result of our concerns we decided to go with Dependency Theory which takes into consideration 2 actors. While considering different theories for our analysis, we examined Karl Marx's Theory of Exploitation. While the Theory of Exploitation provides valuable insights into the dynamics of exploitation within a specific context, we concluded that it might be too narrow for examining the complex relationship between two countries. This theory primarily addresses the economic exploitation within domestic settings and does not fully capture the multifaceted dynamics and bilateral relations that exist between countries and the decision-making role of governments.

During the course of our thesis writing, we encountered several limitations that influenced the overall shape and depth of our paper. One primary limitation we faced pertained to data access. Both China and Zimbabwe maintain a degree of opacity when it comes to disclosing comprehensive investment reports, particularly regarding financial flows and employment-related issues. This lack of transparency presented a challenge as we sought to gather robust and reliable data for our analysis. Consequently, we had to rely on reports and publications from various Western organizations and local media sources. While these sources provided valuable insights, they may not capture the complete picture or align perfectly with our research objectives. Access to comprehensive and reliable data is crucial for conducting a thorough analysis. However, due to the limitations in data availability, we acknowledge that our findings are based on the information accessible to us at the time of our research. This limitation underscores the need for improved data transparency and disclosure practices from both China and Zimbabwe. Another significant constraint we encountered was the lack of funds available for conducting in-depth analysis. Ideally, we would have embarked on a research trip to Zimbabwe, allowing us to engage directly with local communities and gain firsthand knowledge of their sentiments towards China. Such interactions would have enriched our study by providing qualitative data and personal perspectives. Additionally, the opportunity to purchase expensive corporate reports would have enabled us to delve deeper into the exact numerical figures and intricacies of Chinese investments in Zimbabwe. While our limited budget restricted our ability to conduct extensive fieldwork and access proprietary data, we mitigated this limitation by employing rigorous research methodologies and utilizing existing literature, reports, and publicly available data sources. Our aim was to ensure the validity and reliability of our analysis within the given constraints. It is important to acknowledge that the lack of in-depth fieldwork and proprietary data may have limited our ability to capture the full range of perspectives and nuances surrounding China's economic involvement in Zimbabwe. The sentiments and experiences of local communities, which could provide valuable insights into the mutual benefits or potential exploitative nature of the relationship, may not be fully represented in our study. Despite these limitations, we strived to overcome them by adopting a cautious and critical approach to our research. By triangulating information from multiple sources and employing theoretical frameworks such as Dependency Theory and Structural Functionalism, we aimed to compensate for the limitations and provide a comprehensive analysis of China's economic involvement in Zimbabwe. The limitations we faced provide opportunities for future research to delve deeper into the complexities and nuances of China's economic involvement in Zimbabwe. Future studies should aim to overcome these limitations by securing better access to data, conducting extensive fieldwork, and exploring alternative methodologies to enrich the understanding of this subject.

9. Conclusion

This thesis explores whether China's economic involvement in Zimbabwe is exploitative or mutually beneficial. By analyzing trade patterns, investment projects, employment opportunities, and technological transfers and the politics and diplomacy, the study examines the nature of this relationship. The findings reveal a complex picture, indicating both exploitative elements and mutual benefits. Overall, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the dynamics between China and Zimbabwe, informing policymakers and stakeholders involved in shaping economic relationships.

Based on the analysis and interpretation of the research findings, several conclusions can be drawn regarding the research objectives. The main findings suggest that China benefits more from the economic relationship with Zimbabwe, taking advantage of the opportunities created by Zimbabwe's conditions. However, it is important to note that Zimbabwe also derives some benefits from this relationship.

One key conclusion is that China is capitalizing on the economic opportunities presented by Zimbabwe, leveraging its resources and market potential for its own gain. This is evidenced by our dependency theory and structural functionalist analysis of the findings of our case study – with the input functions of Zimbabwe's political system being dominated by ZANU-PF, the matter of the country's economic development and its trajectory after announcing the "Look East" policy was motivated by the party's self-preservation to a significant extent. Chinese investments have allowed Zimbabwe's political elite to remain in power, while also gaining access to tools that helped it tighten its grip on the country. Zimbabwe's citizenry's perceptions of China's involvement in their country are largely negative. While it is true that the investments made in the transport and energy infrastructure fields have been a net benefit in terms of improving mobility, China's extraction of Zimbabwe's natural resources and control over some of the most lucrative mines in the country contributes to the proliferation of the opinion that the PRC is benefitting from this relationship without meaningfully improving the lives of Zimbabwe's citizens. The maltreatment of workers employed by Chinese companies is another reason why the Zimbabwean population perceives China's involvement in their country in a negative light. These findings have led us to the conclusion that the profit distribution appears to primarily benefit the political elites in Zimbabwe, while the society as a whole may face exploitation and unequal benefits. It is also important to note here that we have found no evidence of China attempting to exert control over Zimbabwe's affairs or its critical infrastructure through so-called "debt-trap diplomacy." While the conditions for such a scenario do exist, as seen in the example of the Bikita mine, the extent of China's loans to Zimbabwe, and the African nation's debt situation, China is not actively contributing to their creation, but rather making use of the opportunity that was presented to it by Harare. Thus, it would be unfair to claim that the PRC is "exploiting" Zimbabwe, seeing as its actions are sanctioned by the country's government itself.

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