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An Analytical Framework on the Gender Impact of China's Global Engagement in the global South

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Cai Yiping and Yu Yin

Abbreviations

4WCW	Fourth World Conference on Women
AIIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASEAN 10+3	ASEAN Plus Three and the ASEAN Regional Forum
B3W	Build Back Better World
BPfA	Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa
BRIGC	Belt and Road Initiative International Green Development Coalition
CANGO	China Association for NGO Cooperation
CASCF	China-Arab States Cooperation Forum
CCCMC	China Chamber of Commerce of Metals, Minerals & Chemicals Importers & Exporters
CCETC	China-Caribbean Economic and Trade Cooperation Forum
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CCTV	China Central Television
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
China-CELAC Forum	Forum of China and Community of Latin American and Caribbean States
CNTAC	China National Textile and Apparel Council
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
ESG	Environment, Social and Governance
ESIA	Environmental and Social Impact Assessment

EU	European Union
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FOCAC	Forum on China–Africa Cooperation
G7	Group of Seven
G20	Group of Twenty
GDI	Global Development Initiative
GGGR	Global Gender Gap Report
HRC	Human Rights Council
ICAO	International Civil Aviation Organization
ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
ICPD	International Conference on Population and Development
IFI	International Financial Institution
IR	International Relations
ITU	International Telecommunication Union
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender
MOFCOM	Ministry of Commerce
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NAM	Non-Aligned Movement
NBS	National Bureau of Statistics
NDB	New Development Bank
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NIEO	New International Economic Order
OECD-DAC	Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
OFDI	Outward Foreign Direct Investment
PRC	People's Republic of China
RtD	Right to Development
SAFE	State Administration of Foreign Exchange
SCIO	State Council Information Office

SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SOE	State-Owned Enterprise
SOGI	Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity
SSC	South-South Cooperation
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
UNIDO	United Nations Industrial Development Organization
UNOPS	United Nations Office for Project Services
UNOSSC	United Nations Office on South-South Cooperation
UN WOMEN	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
UPR	Universal Periodic Review
WHO	World Health Organization
WTO	World Trade Organization

DRAFT for discussion

Executive Summary

The past two decades have witnessed a heightened research interest in the emerging field of “Global China” (Lee 2022, Franceshini et al. 2022). This field interrogates China's role in and its profound influence on the global stage. A myriad of studies, initiatives and media reports have focused on China's global footprint; its overseas investments, especially the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and the political, socio-economic, environmental and human rights implications; and its influence on geopolitics and regional dynamics. However, not enough attention has been paid to the gender aspect of Global China, and the issue of gender and sexuality has been largely ignored (Jolly 2016, Cai and Li 2021).

Recently, with China's increasing global commitment to gender equality and women's development at various international forums and in international cooperation programmes, gender issues have been given greater prominence and attention in the country's foreign policy (Xi 2015, 2020). This has prompted researchers and activists to raise concerns about the use of gendered discourses in soft power propaganda in diplomacy and its implications for gender politics in China and across the world.

In collaboration with researchers and activists, DAWN intends to develop an analysis to understand China's global economic, political and security expansion, and its profound impacts on gender equality and women's human rights in the global South. As a first, this analytical framework paper is based on the review of existing literature on themes related to gender and Global China, including but not

limited to the Chinese government's official documents and policy guidelines, academic research as well as reports and analyses by civil society groups located both inside and outside China. The framework examines and synthesises the main theories, methods and arguments of the current research on this subject; identifies the knowledge gaps; and suggests topics and methodologies for further research to be conducted by scholars in the form of case studies set in different regions of the South.

This framework is organised into five sections. The first section reviews the trajectory of China's global engagement – its transition from a planned economy to a market-oriented one, between the late 1970s and the early 1980s, by implementing a series of economic reforms and opening-up policies; China's integration into the neoliberal global economy after joining the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001; and China's ongoing expansion of its global engagements since 2010 and its impacts, with the launch of the BRI and new international financial institutions (IFIs).

The second section interrogates China's global impact by unpacking it from three distinct and interrelated angles – (1) defending multilateralism and China's proactive role in multilateral mechanisms such as the United Nations (UN) system; (2) reshaping the landscape of development cooperation on the global stage through development finance, aid and loans; and (3) various initiatives by China to create new bilateral and multilateral mechanisms such as the BRI bilateral agreements, the Global Development Initiative (GDI) and China+ASEAN10, to name a few. How do these global engagements revamp

global governance, shift geopolitics and influence the narratives on development and human rights? How do they affect and what implications do they have for gender equality and women's rights domestically and internationally? These questions are at the centre of the third and fourth sections of this paper.

The third section briefly examines gender politics and feminist activism in contemporary China, and the paradoxes between state policies that commit to promote gender equality and the persistence of gender inequalities.

Section four analyses the gender discourse and practice in China's global engagement. How is it articulated in the government's official documents? How is it implemented in development cooperation programmes? And why is there a gap between rhetoric and action?

In the last section, we propose the framework and methodology that can be applied to study the gender impact of China's global engagement, and make recommendations for further inquiries through the prism of Global China and Southern feminist analysis. We argue that the gender impact of China's global engagement is a co-product in a dynamic process of action, interaction and contestation involving many actors, and is best assessed in various locations simultaneously and comprehensively, especially grounded in the realities of the South. However, current related research and analyses primarily focus on the state, see China as a monolithic entity and are embedded in narrow binary frameworks of South vs. North, China vs. the West or authoritarianism vs. liberal democracy. DAWN strongly believes that there is an urgent need to collaborate with feminist researchers from various regions of the global South to produce

grounded empirical case studies. The aim of this collaboration is to challenge the narrow frameworks and contribute to knowledge production, and thus shake off Western racism and totalitarian control of knowledge. It also aims to hold states and corporate sectors, both from the South and the North, accountable for safeguarding the human rights and well-being of women and people of the South, and ensuring the sustainability of the planet.

Each case study will be aligned with the analytical framework paper and further explore one or more of the following questions from a regional and country context:

- What role does gender play in China's global engagement, for example, in its strategic engagement in multilateral mechanisms such as the UN and other new institutions, and/or its negotiations of bilateral or multilateral trade agreements; its initiation of South-South cooperation narratives and practices; and its implementation of multilateral financiers' social and environmental safeguards?
- How do Chinese investment projects, such as the BRI and other international development aid projects, influence gender equality, women's lives, and their human rights in the local community and neighbourhood?
- As a "new actor", do China's overseas investments and development programmes differ from those of traditional donors or investors in terms of gender policies and gender-related impact assessments? If so, how? If not, why?

- How do Southern feminists and social movements strengthen women's rights and gender equality, and obtain social and environmental justice in the face of potentially adverse impacts of Chinese foreign aid and investments?

We call upon a Southern feminist vision to deconstruct the unequal power matrix, decolonise knowledge production and decentralise the state actor, regardless of whether it is located in the South or the North. We contend that the perspectives and experiences of women from the global South should be placed at the centre of these analyses, which is only possible through dialogue, collaboration and solidarity.

1. Contextualising China's global engagement

1.1 Background

First and foremost, it is worth noting that although this framework primarily focuses on China's global engagement over the past two decades, after the reforms and opening-up policies of the late 1970s and the early 1980s, it is important to recognise the country's long history of engagement with the world. China's trade relations with Asia and Africa predate the colonial era when China was controlled by European and Japanese empires, from the time of the Opium Wars in the 1840s all the way to the Second World War in the 1940s. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, and since severing contact with its most important political ally, the Soviet Union, in 1956, China has been aligned with the former colonies and newly independent countries collectively known as the Third World, developing countries or the global South (Yu 1977). This political positioning has persisted from the Bandung Conference (1955) to the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), and continues today with the Group of 77+China at the United Nations (UN). This history is not insignificant, as it has been constantly recalled and re-narrated in contemporary China's global engagement, specifically in its relations with the global South (Franceschini and Loubere 2021).

The second, and equally important, point is that China's global engagement needs to be understood within the context of its longstanding and intertwined project of nation building and worldmaking. Sharing the vision of many developing countries, Chinese leaders believe that the priority of the country is to build a strong economy through development or, more precisely, economic growth, and catch up with the developed world (Huang 2016). Meanwhile, China, along with other developing countries, has been advocating for a more equal and just world economic order (New International Economic Order or NIEO), a political agenda that is being sidelined by the developed countries at the UN (Prashad 2007, Getachew 2019). Therefore, it is not surprising to see that China's economic expansion extends or imitates the "success" of its development experience at the national level, with its emphasis on infrastructure and trade, harnessing population dividends, etc. Other developing countries are replicating China's development path.

Finally, China's global engagement should be examined alongside broader geopolitics, both then and now. Then, Mao's globalism and the Three Worlds Theory responded to the reality of the Cold War and the China-Soviet Union dispute, and were largely driven by the ideological and internationalist agenda (Lin 2019). Now, as the second largest economy, China's global engagement is part of the "rise of the South" phenomenon (UNDP 2013) and the global governance revamp in the midst of multifaceted crises faced by global capitalism.

1.2 Trajectory of China's global engagement

Since the establishment of the PRC in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) maintained a centrally planned economy, with policies aimed at building self-reliance and catching up with the developed world. These economic policies, such as the Great Leap Forward, the People's Commune and consecutive political campaigns against "the right", "the revisionist" and the Cultural Revolution, led to the Great Famine, political chaos and economic collapse at the end of the 1970s (Weatherley 2007).

After Deng Xiaoping took over the leadership in 1978, China began its economic reform and transition from a planned to a market economy. From the 1980s, a series of "open up and reform" policies fostered economic growth and unleashed productivity by promoting the role of the market, private entrepreneurship and the privatisation of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) (Tisdell 2009). However, these policies also spurred inflation and unemployment, and led to the withdrawal of state-provided social services, which impacted women adversely and disproportionately (Ding et al. 2009).

China joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001. Since then, its foreign trade and foreign investment inflows have increased unprecedentedly, and it has come to be known as the World's Factory. Data from the WTO shows that from 2000 to 2009, the average annual growth rates of China's exports and imports were 17 and 15 respectively, much higher than the 3 per cent annual growth in world trade in the same period (SCIO 2011). By the end of 2009, the total value of China's outward foreign direct investment (OFDI) had reached US\$5.6 billion (MOFCOM,

NBS and SAFE 2009), with the country fully integrating into the global capitalist system and neoliberal globalisation (So 2007).

During the 2008 global financial crisis, the Chinese government announced a RMB 4 trillion (US\$572 billion) economic stimulus plan for infrastructure and social welfare, which kept the economy afloat (Naughton 2009). However, by 2012, the government had to deal with industrial overcapacity and stagnating exports. With the rise of the emerging economies of the global South, China needed to improve its engagement with developing economies to explore and gain new markets around the globe. The BRI was conceived at this point to improve trade and cooperation between different regions and continents of the world (Liu and Dunford 2016).

The BRI is an extension of China's "Going Out Strategy" that can be traced back to the 14th CCP Congress held in 1992. In 1996, President Jiang Zemin formally announced the Going Out Strategy to deepen China's engagement with the international economy and encourage Chinese companies to become familiar with "multinational operations". China joining the WTO was also framed as part of this strategy, to promote Chinese brands in international markets (Tower 2020).

Several reasons propelled China's economic expansion into the global South. First, the Chinese government was dependent on the country's foreign exchange reserves to buy US treasury bonds, and thus sought alternatives (Wang 2016, Ohashi 2018). Chinese overseas investments, mergers and acquisitions became the alternatives. Second, Western powers pressured China to become a responsible player, but balked when China requested a greater voice within multilateral

institutions, which gradually led the Chinese government to take a more proactive role in creating new international institutions and launching new initiatives such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the BRI (Tower 2020, Lin 2019). The third reason lies in China's internal politics, as the CCP sought to legitimise its leadership through an anti-corruption campaign and the nationalistic "China Dream" campaign. As Lin (2019) points out, a morally appealing domestic model is the foundation of China's so-called soft power.

The BRI, announced in 2013, originated from President Xi Jinping's visits to Kazakhstan and Indonesia in September and October of that year. Xi raised the initiative of jointly building the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. From there, Chinese overseas economic expansion was fast tracked. By the end of 2021, to promote the five overarching goals of policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration and people-to-people bonds, China signed BRI Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) with over 140 countries and 32 international organisations (yidaiyilu.gov.cn 2022).

It is worth noting that China's "rise" and global engagement have coincided with the expansion of neoliberalism and globalisation characterised by privatisation, financialisation, deregulation and marketisation. This is not accidental, but rather an integral part of the strategic reconfiguration of the global capitalist system. This is also the era of developmentalism, which prioritises economic growth over social justice, equality and ecological sustainability (So 2007). As the Chinese scholar Wang Hui (2009) has pointed out, marketism and developmentalism have become

part of the state ideology in China, just as elsewhere in the developing world, legitimising the exploitation of cheap labour in developing countries, including Chinese labour, as well as the degradation of the environment. Research has shown that China seeks to shift its role in the global economy from supplying cheap labour and low-end commodities to providing development finance to other developing countries through investments under the BRI (Liu and Dunford 2016).

2. Examining China's global impact

China's expansion into the global economy and its participation in global governance over the past two decades have had profound and multifaceted global impacts at various levels.

Current research about these impacts primarily concentrates on two differentiated but interrelated areas. The first set of research uses a political economy framework to analyse how China's global engagement, especially its state capital, reconfigures the global capitalist system in production and consumption (So 2010). The second set is embedded in the disciplines of international relations (IR) and development studies, and interrogates China's influence on the global governance structure as well as the international development cooperation narrative and practice (Abdenur 2014, Yeh 2016). In recent years, more and more researchers have been applying Global China as a method (Lee 2017 and 2022, Franceschini and Loubere 2022) which expands beyond China's territorial boundaries to analyse the various actors involved in the process of China's global engagement, including the burgeoning countermovement and resistance (Xu 2022, Lee 2017 and 2022). This method abandons the assumption that China Going Out is a state-led top-down centralised monolithic strategy. Instead, it uses an interdisciplinary approach and mixed methods – ethnography, geography, cultural studies, migration studies, history, sociology and gender studies, in addition to economics and IR – to produce more nuanced analyses on the subject (Choudhury 2020, Xu 2022, Repnikova 2022, Lu 2022, Gong 2022, Chen 2022).

Although China's global engagement takes many forms across diverse areas and involves different actors, so far, a considerable number of studies, initiatives and media reports have focused on state actors, especially the BRI. This framework paper intends to unpack China's global impact from three angles – (1) defending multilateralism and China's active participation in the UN system; (2) reshaping the landscape of development cooperation on the global stage through development finance, aid and loans; and (3) creating and strengthening new bilateral and multilateral initiatives and mechanisms with focus on South-South cooperation.

2.1 Defending multilateralism and China's participation in the UN system

In 1971, the General Assembly Resolution 2758 voted in favour of restoring the Chinese seat at the UN to the PRC, replacing the Taiwan authority representing China (Choudhury 2020). As one of five permanent members of the UN Security Council, China has since become an active member at the most important multilateral intergovernmental platform. China signed and ratified several core international human rights treaties, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). China also joined the WTO and the WHO, negotiating trade deals and engaging with the governance of world health (Kent 2002).

Chinese nationals head several specialised UN agencies such as the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) and the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) (Fung and Lam 2020, 2021). After the United States, China is currently the second-largest monetary contributor to the UN, contributing 12 per cent of the annual budget; it is also a major donor to UN peacekeeping operations (Tung and Yang 2020).

In recent years, to counter the US' unilateralism and exceptionalism, specifically after former President Donald Trump started a "trade war" against China, and withdrew from the Paris Agreement on climate change and the UN Human Rights Council (HRC), the Chinese government has become more vocal and proactive in defending multilateralism (Abdenur 2014, Chan 2015, Stephen 2021). Meanwhile, it uses the UN system as a platform to legitimise and amplify the benefits of the BRI framework. Liu (2021) notes that the UN Secretariat, the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council and 15 other specialised UN agencies participated in the BRI. Apart from signing MoUs with all these UN agencies, China tries to integrate the BRI objectives with the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through the GDI, which it launched in 2021. China also works closely with the UN Office on South-South Cooperation (UNOSSC) on technology transfer and economic cooperation. The UN, in turn, sees the BRI as a great opportunity for international cooperation. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), for instance, coordinates a South-South cooperation project on renewable energy technology transfer between China, Ghana and Zambia, under the BRI. The UNDP supports the cooperation platform by developing,

managing and promoting the project, and using its network and relationships to solve challenges that crop up periodically. Liu concludes that the UN system plays a key role as a BRI partner, providing institutional support throughout the system, engaging in cooperation projects, commenting for improvement and coordinating its various counterparts to support the implementation of BRI projects.

While some researchers see China as a responsible international player in the UN system, others are suspicious about its growing influence within the organisation, particularly with respect to its attitude towards human rights (Brooks 2018, Foot 2020, Worden 2020, Oud 2020, Inboden 2021). They point out that the Chinese government uses the UN space, especially the HRC, to leverage political alliances; shift the UN language toward the Chinese government's ideas, such as emphasising development as a prerequisite for achieving human rights; and change or adjust the current multilateral human rights system at the procedural level by trying to prohibit independent human rights NGOs from participating in UN meetings or interfering with the visits of Special Rapporteurs and independent experts to China. For example, in 2015, China committed US\$1 billion over 10 years to support the UN's work on development and security but not on human rights.

From its inception, the UN has been, and would continue to be, a politically polarised contesting ground, especially over human rights issues, where developing countries like China are criticised for their violations of human rights (these include political and civil rights such as freedom of expression, assembly and so on) while developed countries consistently deny the right to development

(which comes under the ambit of economic and social rights). This ongoing debate is beyond the scope of this framework.

However, it should be acknowledged that the UN, as an important multilateral mechanism in global governance, provides a valuable and legitimate space for civil society and social movements to engage with and hold governments, both in the North and the South, accountable. It is interesting to see that at the latest HRC session (13 June – 8 July 2022), many Chinese think tanks, research institutions and civil society groups sponsored and participated in side events covering a wide range of human rights issues in and outside China. For example, the China Association for NGO Cooperation (CANGO), the China National Textile and Apparel Council (CNTAC) and the China Chamber of Commerce of Metals, Minerals & Chemicals Importers & Exporters (CCC MC) co-sponsored a side event titled “Business and Human Rights: Gender Equality and Children’s Rights Protection in International Investment and Trade”. Participants from UN agencies, international organisations, Chinese enterprises, and academic and civil societies shared their insights and experiences at this event. It is imperative that civil society organisations (CSOs) and women’s rights advocates concerned about China’s global engagement learn to negotiate with it more strategically in such multilateral spaces and through international human rights mechanisms, including the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), CEDAW, CRC, CRPD and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

2.2 Reshaping the landscape of development financing and cooperation

China is not the only “emerging” donor in global development financing, but it is undoubtedly the most important one. According to a report by AidData, an international development research lab based in William & Mary's Global Research Institute, since the launch of the BRI in 2013, China has overtaken the US and other major powers in development finance spending. In an average year during the BRI era, China spent US\$85 billion on overseas development programmes as compared to the US' \$37 billion (Malik et al. 2021). In its report, AidData analyses 13,427 projects worth US\$843 billion financed by more than 300 Chinese government institutions and state-owned entities across 165 countries. The report criticises the Chinese government for using debt rather than aid to establish a dominant position in the international development finance market, and lending to low- and middle-income countries on less generous terms than loans from the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD-DAC) and multilateral creditors. It also warns that Chinese lending creates a “hidden debt” as it is not directed to sovereign borrowers but to state-owned companies, banks and private sector institutions in recipient countries, which creates major public financial management challenges for developing countries.

Other researchers, however, offer a different perspective on Chinese development finance. Singh (2021) argues that the theory of debt-trap diplomacy does not accurately describe Chinese development financing. Singh contends that China

uses its financing power to facilitate a shift in geopolitics, and that the debt-trap diplomacy narrative of some African observers seem to be motivated more by frantic Sino-phobia rather than any genuine concern for the economic and fiscal health of African countries. Using a case study of Tanzania based on both qualitative and quantitative research methods, Kinyondo (2019) concludes that China gets the lion's share of benefits from Sino-Africa cooperation, the balance of trade is skewed towards China and there is very little Chinese FDI in Africa. Nevertheless, he believes that China, like any other country, acts in its national interest, and African countries should stipulate what they want from Sino-Africa cooperation and "prioritize the development of local content through technological transfer, curb corruption, and build a critical mass of negotiators". Interestingly, both Singh and Kinyondo use the same database but draw opposite conclusions on debt-trap diplomacy, thus demonstrating that positionality, research methodology, source of data, and processing and interpretation of data are crucial in research on China's global engagement.

Ching Kwan Lee's (2017) research on two industries in Zambia, namely copper and construction, based on seven years of empirical ethnographic work, analyses the particularity of Chinese state capital struggling to balance profit seeking with considerations of political goals. Lee points out that the power of Chinese state capital is subject to constant contestation and changes over time to accommodate local development needs, which provides governments and workers opportunities to leverage their bargaining power.

Oliveira and Myers (2021) argue that the dominant narrative on the BRI, which portrays it as “a top-down geo-political project of the Chinese central government”, is misleading and inaccurate. This is because it overstates the role of the Chinese central government and the unity of interests among Chinese actors, while overlooking the divergent and contested interests of Chinese and foreign actors (governments, businesses and social movements). According to the authors, the emergence of the BRI in Latin America is “a co-produced bundle of diplomacy and lobbying efforts, financial and technical resources, and both converging and conflicting interests across China, Latin America, and beyond”.

The key criticism of Chinese development finance is the lack of transparency in trade, loan and investment deals (Tower 2020). Countries with political instability, low government budgets or high levels of corruption welcome China's foreign aid and loans as they are based on the principles of non-conditionality, non-intervention and respect for sovereignty (Condon 2012). This implies that recipient governments do not have to share the details of the MoUs with the public and the impacted communities, even though they may potentially undermine the sustainability and well-being of the same communities. Other criticisms stem from the negative impacts of large-scale infrastructure, mining and energy projects on communities and the environment; opaque project agreements and excessive debt burdens; superficial environmental and social impact assessments (ESIAs) and other due diligence measures; and the danger of investments destabilising high-conflict areas (Tower 2020).

Condon (2012) compares Western development finance with that of China by examining debates centred on the usefulness or ethics of loan conditionalities, and the trade-off between respect for sovereignty and the principles of human rights. The West may overlook what Africans ultimately need by setting loan conditionalities such as the promotion of democracy and human rights and the reduction of corruption, which may be seen as interfering with these countries' internal affairs. China, on the other hand, has found success by following a strategy of "growth at any cost", and believes African countries can copy the Chinese development model. Chinese investors believe that economic development and investment come before civil and political rights, and value family and community over individuality. Hence, the Western concept of human rights is not applicable universally. At the same time, anti-Chinese sentiment is increasing, especially amongst communities adversely affected by Chinese investments.

The way Chinese firms behave in foreign countries depends largely on their local improvisation and ability to bargain with the host states. This is particularly true in the least developing economies. Studying Chinese investments, especially private capital, in Ethiopia's manufacturing industry, Chen Weiwei (2022) concludes that Chinese private capital is not different from other private capital aimed at profit making and market seeking. Chinese firms invest overseas due to increasing domestic costs. In the case of Ethiopia, the political leadership grabbed the opportunity by providing proactive industrial policies, integrating FDI into national development and the structural transformation agenda, and leveraging the country's comparative advantages such as low water, electricity and wage

costs, a large and young labour force, and favourable access to the US and European Union markets.

Alden et al. (2019) problematise the issue of China's development model and its influence on Africa. By examining the history of China-Africa partnerships, and China's current involvement in Africa's resource-industrialisation complex and global neoliberal capitalism, the authors argue that Africa has been a reactive subject rather than an objective agent in setting the terms and conditions of the discourse and debates over its development. They contend that African countries should be the drivers of their own development programmes and policies, and the role of external actors, such as China, should be supportive and complementary.

Undoubtedly, China's development financing and cooperation have deeply influenced both practice and narrative in global development financing, which has otherwise been dominated by the OECD countries. In turn, these countries have responded by revamping their policies and strategies. Against the backdrop of a US-China "strategic rivalry" and a slowdown in economic growth in China and the world due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a recent initiative "Build Back Better World" (B3W) was announced on 12 June 2021 by the G7 countries - United Kingdom, US, Canada, Japan, France, Germany and Italy - and the EU. It is a strategic partnership to mobilise infrastructure investments in low- and middle-income countries. On 26 June 2022, the G7 countries launched the "Partnership for Global infrastructure and Investment". The US has pledged to mobilise US\$200 billion in public and private capital over the next five years for this partnership in four areas - health and health security, digital connectivity,

gender equality and equity, and climate and energy security (The White House 2022). This new initiative is expected to compete with China's BRI or against China as a whole. Two key aspects of this new initiative, namely the focus on public-private partnerships and the commitment to gender equality, require in-depth feminist analysis.

It should be emphasised that China's international development cooperation goes beyond economic development and includes health, education, culture and technology. It also involves many more actors beyond states and enterprises, such as civil societies, trade unions, parastate actors, brokers, international organisations, affected communities, indigenous peoples, etc. The analytical framework will form a basis to explore and evaluate the complex dynamics and nuances of this research subject.

2.3 Creating and strengthening new multilateral mechanisms

In recent years, China has initiated and created new multilateral development institutions and funds engaging at regional levels and expanding to the global level. China has also evolved from being a co-founder and participant at these forums to acting more frequently as the initiator and host. Some researchers see this as China's attempt to effect a "realignment of the international order through establishing parallel structures to a wide range of international institutions". Others see it as a form of "institutional (re)balancing" of the unequal global power relations dominated by US hegemony (Abdenur 2014, Stephen 2021).

ASEAN 10+3 (ASEAN Plus Three and the ASEAN Regional Forum) and the East Asian Summit constitute the initial phase of China's regional multilateral engagement which started before 2000 (Chan 2015). China also created several China-centred regional forums. The Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) is a good example. It was initiated in April 2000 and has now become a triennial summit. This model has also been replicated in different regions such as the Middle East (China–Arab States Cooperation Forum or CASCF), the Caribbean (China–Caribbean Economic and Trade Cooperation Forum or CCETC), Europe (Cooperation Between China and Central and Eastern European Countries, known as 17+1) and Latin America (Forum of China and Community of Latin American and Caribbean States or the China–CELAC Forum). This type of forum appears to allow China significant room to set the agenda and may challenge the non-hierarchical connotations of multilateralism that China advocates for. The Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) group (2011), New Development Bank (NDB) (2015) and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) (2015) symbolise China's expansion of its multilateralism globally.

Is China-led multilateralism different? Some of the new multilateralism may complement existing multilateral frameworks, for example, the ASEAN 10+3, which includes China, Japan and South Korea (Stephen 2021). Others may try to substitute the governance functions, membership and resources of existing institutions. This happens when actors are not satisfied with the governance of existing institutions, but accept their goals and principles; by creating a new institution, they can increase their own influence and prestige (Stephen 2021). For example, China sponsors AIIB and NDB to rebalance institutional power with

other multilateral development banks and IFIs while maintaining consistency with existing norms. The formation of BRICS is a consequence of the rise of the emerging economies and shifting geopolitics. BRICS members want to enhance their leadership role internationally, and gradually weaken the institutional centrality of the US (Abdenur 2014).

These new multilateral organisations undoubtedly redistribute the power and resources held by existing organisations, diversify influence and mandates, offer more choices for service takers and enhance China's bargaining power. For example, NDB and AIIB provide alternative funding for recipient countries (Stephen 2021).

Meanwhile, China plays a leading role in creating international platforms and mechanisms for dialogue that challenges existing narratives, and promotes new languages and norms with Chinese characteristics to the world (Stephen 2021, Oud 2020). For example, in addition to the principles of governance based on market competition, human rights, democracy, transparency, accountability and the rule of law, China also emphasises values such as development, a harmonious world, a community of shared destiny, balanced and equal partnership, shared prosperity between the global North and South, diversity and tolerance, and peaceful resolution of international conflict. Two examples are the High-Level Dialogue on Global Development in 2022 and the South-South Human Rights Forum in 2017 which were events sponsored by the Chinese government. Within the South-South cooperation (SSC) framework, China reiterates its position on the human rights regime, emphasising the importance of "national conditions",

declaring the right to subsistence and the right to development to be “the primary basic human rights”, and identifying respect for national sovereignty as the “basic governing norm” of human rights (SCIO 2017).

Most of the new mechanisms that China creates are based on the South-South framework. Chinese discourse on the global South or SSC is increasingly reframed within China's global connectivity politics, and re-categorises the “South” as being located relationally to China to avoid the dichotomous differentiation between developed and developing states, and the resulting ideological struggle (Kohlenberg et al. 2021, Liu 2022). International communities, especially civil society groups both in the global North and South, react to Chinese multilateralism or, more specifically, to the BRI, differently. Some civil society groups investigate and engage with the social and environmental impacts of BRI projects and investments, and use international treaties/safety standards, national laws and media to voice their concerns about the adverse effects (Tower 2020; Swaine, Mariani and Jones 2021; Shieh et al. 2021; Shieh 2022). Other CSOs have been engaging with the BRI's Green Policy and implementation guide development. The Belt and Road Initiative International Green Development Coalition (BRIGC) is a typical example. Under the supervision of the Chinese Ministry of Ecology and Environment, the BRIGC plays a part in the platform or hub which links international CSOs and think tanks to offer professional and analytical suggestions on Green BRI policy making and implementation (BRIGC 2020).

Many scholars problematise the concept of the “global South” and challenge the binary of the South-North divide. Mignolo (2011) argues that the global South is a consequence of five hundred years of European imperialism and colonialism, and the result of Euro-centric global linear thinking. Ramcharan (2016) and Weiss et al. (2016) recount the history of establishment of the UN in the 1940s, and elucidate the strong demands for justice and equality in countries of the South that shaped the normative human rights framework and the multilateral institution. However, the challenge today is to identify a common ground for compromise and collaboration. Waisbich et al. (2021) propose the notion of polyphony for approaching the global South, demystifying its inherent complexities and engaging with the evolving actors behind the different uses of the moniker. Nevertheless, how Chinese-propelled multilateralism is distinguished from the multilateralism dominated by the global North remains a question to be answered. Moreover, multilateralism has itself evolved towards the new framing of “multistakeholderism”, which involves the private sector as an important partner and stakeholder, and makes it even more crucial to undertake further research on this front, especially how multistakeholderism impacts gender equality and women's rights in the global South.

3. Gender equality in China

To understand contemporary gender politics in China and how gender issues are situated within China's global engagement, it is necessary to review the historical trajectory of gender equality and women's rights over the past century, especially how it was intertwined with the agendas of the Chinese revolution and national development.

3.1 Women's liberation in the national revolution and development agenda

The existing literature on Chinese history and Chinese feminist movements reveals that for Chinese thinkers and political leaders, women's liberation has always been an integral part of the political agenda to pursue national sovereignty, economic development and modernisation (Gilmartin 1995, Rofel 1999, Wang 1999 and 2017, Hershatter 2007, Liu et al. 2013, Cong 2016). Equality between men and women has been outlined in the PRC's first Constitution (1954) as well as other laws and policies such as the Marriage Law (1951), the Law on Protection of Women's Rights and Interests (1995) and the Anti-Domestic Violence Law (2015), among others. However, women's liberation is an unfinished revolution (Stacey 198). Equality between men and women was declared a basic state policy by President Jiang Zemin at the welcome ceremony of the UN's Fourth World Conference on Women (4WCW) in 1995. During Mao's era (1949-1976), women were given the role of "holding up half the sky" and undertook the same manual

labour as men. Socialist state feminists fought on multiple fronts, as Communist Party members and state officials, to push for pro-women state policies towards an egalitarian vision of a modern socialist China premised on equality between women and men (Wang 2017). Despite the progress made, including the establishment of formal equality in the legal framework, the principle of equal remuneration (equal pay for equal work) and an improvement in maternal health, how the party-state could keep the equality promises and fulfil their commitments in a patriarchal society, especially in rural areas, remains a mammoth challenge.

Since 1978, Chinese economic reforms and opening-up policies after Mao's era brought about tremendous social change. These reforms follow the neoliberal doctrine of marketisation and privatisation. They prioritise economic growth and reduce women's status in transitional China, manifested in the feminisation of the agricultural labour force and increasing rates of suicide among women in rural areas, lay-offs of women from formal employment in urban areas and exploitation of migrant women workers in the export-oriented industrialisation zones (Cartier and Rothenberg-Aalami 1999). These "women's problems" prompted Chinese feminists to search for a new path for liberation and equality in the post-socialist and transitional era.

Interestingly, the concept of gender was only introduced in Chinese academia and activism in the 1990s, along with Western feminist scholarship and the transnational feminist movement in the wake of 4WCW. Chinese feminist scholars and activists began to use the concept of gender to reinterpret the doctrine of equality between men and women; disrupt its binary connotation of biological

determinism; and claim political, economic and reproductive rights and autonomy (Hsiung et al. 2001, Cai and Liu 2005, Kaufman 2021, Kaufman et al. 2014, Liu 2015, Liu et al. 2015, Min 2017, Hsiung 2021). It is noteworthy that in the English translation of the Chinese government's official statements, "gender equality" and "equality between men and women" are often used interchangeably, which creates ambiguity and confusion for world audiences on how these terms are being used, in what contexts and what they signify, all of which will be further elaborated in the following section.

3.2 Main challenges in achieving gender equality and women's rights

The Chinese government's official documents, such as "Equality, Development and Sharing: Progress of Women's Cause in 70 Years since New China's Founding" (2019), and reports on implementation of the CEDAW (1997, 2004, 2012, 2020), outline the achievements and progress that China has made in promoting gender equality and protecting women's rights. But there are considerable gaps between the framing of laws and their implementation, and between rhetoric and reality. China ranks at the lower end or in the middle rungs of several global gender equality indicators. For example, in the Global Gender Gap Report (GGGR) 2020 published by the World Economic Forum, China was ranked 106th out of 153 countries surveyed. Due to its poor performance in women's political participation and new-born sex ratio imbalance, China's ranking has dropped steadily since 2008 when it was ranked 57th.

There remain some prominent challenges in achieving gender equality and

women's human rights in China. The first challenge is the glaring gap between the laws/policies that promote women's rights and gender equality, and their insufficient implementation and enforcement (Liu Xiaonan 2020). According to research by women's NGOs (Equality 2021), although the Anti-Domestic Violence Law was enacted in 2016, few women victims actually have access to the legal protection and remedies guaranteed by the legislation. Moreover, many laws and policies are still gender blind, if not gender biased, especially in the infrastructure and transportation development programmes. In its concluding comments, the CEDAW committee expressed its concerns about the government's prioritisation of infrastructure programmes over social spending, and the impact of these policies on women and girls, particularly in rural areas (CEDAW Committee 2006).

Second, the rapid economic growth seen in China in recent years has escalated inequalities, including gender inequality, which intersects with location (rural vs. urban, east coastal region vs. inner and west provinces), age, ethnicity and disabilities. In terms of women's economic status, Chinese women's labour force participation rate is relatively higher than the world average – women accounted for 43.5 per cent of all employees in urban work units in 2020 (NBS 2021). However, according to data from the World Bank, the labour force participation rate of Chinese women decreased from 73 per cent in 1990 to 61.61 per cent in 2021. This means a considerable number of women withdrew from the labour market voluntarily or involuntarily. Meanwhile, the occupational composition of women and men still differ considerably. More men are employed in China's secondary industry whilst women dominate the primary industry, meaning that

women are concentrated in low-paid less-valued sectors such as agriculture. Moreover, there are significantly more men in managerial positions. In the area of social security, the proportion of women who receive the minimum subsistence allowance is lower than that of men in both urban and rural areas, and this proportion is even lower for rural women (NBS 2019). In line with women's status in economic and social development, the proportion of women in leadership roles at all levels is very low. In 2018, less than 25 per cent of seats in the National People's Congress were held by female delegates, and only one woman was present in the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the CCP. In terms of reproductive health, statistics from the National Health Commission show that the contraceptive prevalence rate among married women of reproductive age was more than 80 per cent in 2017 while only 21.4 per cent of men in the same category used contraceptives. With regards to education, Zheng et al. (2020) point out that although China has achieved "data equality" in women and girls' education, it has a long way to go to achieve substantive equality and transform discriminatory gender norms and stereotypes in the educational system. Traditional social norms and gender roles restrict women from fulfilling their potential, as they disproportionately shoulder the burden of reproductive and caregiving work. A time use survey conducted in 2018 in China indicates that women spent about twice the time on unpaid work than men (NBS 2019).

Third, gender-based violence remains one of the most critical women's human rights issues that has drawn grave concerns from feminist activists and the general public. Rong Weiyi (2020) points out that despite the considerable progress made, horrendous cases of domestic violence, sexual harassment, trafficking of women

and femicide exposed by both mainstream and social media from time to time have stirred public outcry against the deterioration in women's bodily security and autonomy. Some examples include well-known tennis player Peng Shuai accusing a high-level official of sexually assaulting her; a woman named Lamu in Southwest China being set on fire by her ex-husband in front of a camera when she was livestreaming (BBC 2020, CCTV 2020); a trafficked woman in the Jiangsu province of East China being chained by the neck and locked up by her husband and forced to give birth to several children (Li 2022); and the latest case of two women being brutally beaten up by a sexual harasser in a restaurant in Tangshan in North China (Ni 2022).

Last but not least, researchers point out that women's rights and gender equality advocacy faces dual challenges from authoritarian state censorship and neoliberalism marketisation. The former manifests in the stigmatisation of feminist activism as anti-government action manipulated by hostile Western forces, and the state cracking down on feminist NGOs and the #MeToo movement in China (Wang 2021, Xianzi 2021, Xiong and Ristivojevic 2021). The latter, as explained by Wu and Dong (2019), purports that gender equality can be achieved by investing sexual capital in the marriage market, for example, through plastic surgery and other ways of "improving" femininity, which enables women to marry rich men and thereby elevate their social status. These two strands of anti-feminism can also be observed in current global gender politics in other parts of the world. Chinese feminists, as their comrades elsewhere, continue to explore the possibilities for networking and activism at the local, national and global levels as well as in virtual spaces.

DRAFT for discussion

4. Gender in China's global engagement

In this section, we discuss the gender impact of China's global engagement based on existing literature that includes the Chinese government's official statements and policies, its approach to implementing the commitment on gender equality and women's development globally as well as research and analysis by scholars and NGOs on the gender impact of Chinese overseas investments. We would like to get clarity on (1) how the concept of gender is being defined in the official discourse; (2) how it is being implemented in development practices; and (3) what the consequences are on the ground.

4.1 Vulnerable and binary: Defining gender in development discourse and the human rights framework

A textual analysis of Chinese official documents related to China's global engagement shows that the terms gender equality and women's empowerment are usually used interchangeably. Women are often framed as part of a vulnerable group together with children, the elderly and people with disabilities (SCIO 2021). For example, President Xi Jinping at Session I of the 16th G20 Leaders' Summit in 2021 stated, "We also need to protect women, children, the elderly, people with disabilities and other vulnerable groups, and provide for people's basic needs". Paradoxically, women's potential and agency are acknowledged at the same time. It is believed that building women's capacity and safeguarding their health will

enable women to actively contribute towards building a harmonious, stable and prosperous society, and foster national economic development, which will ultimately lead to gender equality. In the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation Beijing Action Plan (2019-2021), gender equality was categorised under the youth and women section together with women's empowerment, which was associated with health care, skill training, etc. In China's 2022-2024 Action Plan, the discourse on gender equality and women's empowerment followed the previous path, with its emphasis on realising women's potential in the economy, politics and security through capacity building and exchange. In a white paper titled "China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era" (SCIO 2021), gender equality is treated as equivalent to women's development, and safeguarding women's rights and interests is narrowed down to health care promotion.

This narrative on gender equality and women's empowerment is deeply rooted in the Marxist materialist orthodox doctrine on women's liberation in the Chinese political context. According to this doctrine, economic independence is a prerequisite for women's emancipation, which in turn should be an inherent part of national liberation and serve this overall goal (Liu 2021). This narrative also coheres with the official Chinese position on human rights that prioritises the right to development (RtD). The RtD holds that people's rights to subsistence and development is a fundamental human right and a prerequisite for pursuing economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights (China Daily 2022). In contrast, the dominant Western international human rights narrative focuses on individual rights and freedom. Although the term human rights, and its inherent, inalienable, interdependent and indivisible characteristics, have been acknowledged as the

universal norm, the contradiction of different human rights frameworks persists (Salamatin 2020). China is known for its enthusiastic advocacy for the RtD at the international level, and for showcasing the “Chinese approach” to achieving human rights through economic growth and poverty alleviation as a model “suitable for developing countries” (SCIO 2016 and 2021, Oud 2020). This is embodied in Chinese global engagement, especially in Chinese overseas investments. China claims these investments contribute to the national economy and create jobs for locals in the host countries. However, critics highlight that far from promoting the civil and political rights of people in the receiving countries, these investments neglect the environmental and social (gender) impacts and affect labour adversely (Osondu-Oti 2016).

The narrow narrative on gender equality and women in development also guides the Chinese government's official position in international negotiations and diplomatic activities on related issues at the UN (Cai and Li 2021). Cai (2021) observes that the Chinese government has joined the global consensus and commitment to promote gender equality and women's rights, including the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA) adopted in Beijing at the UN 4WCW in 1995, the 2030 development agenda and the SDGs adopted in 2015. Unlike some other member states in the UN negotiations, China does not intend to block the language on gender equality or substitute it with “equality between men and women”. However, it is reluctant to support the language of sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) due to the lack of consensus on this issue among member states (Cai 2021). It is interesting to note that in response to an inquiry from a UN CEDAW committee member in 2014 on the issue of

discrimination based on SOGI in China, the government representative explicitly stated that all citizens are equal before the law and there is no legal discrimination based on SOGI (Rong 2020). In fact, the newly amended Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests, implemented on 1 January 2023, includes several articles that prohibit discrimination against women. However, this law does not provide a legal definition of discrimination in accordance with the CEDAW despite repeated recommendations by the CEDAW committee to that effect, which is expected to negatively affect its implementability. This "strategic ambiguity" on gender-related issues reflects China's longstanding and consistent adherence in diplomacy to the principle of "seek[ing] common ground while reserving differences" (qiu tong cun yi 求同存异). However, this ambiguity more likely arises from the fact that China does not consider gender-related issues a priority and a matter of core national interest that must be defended at an international forum.

The Chinese government propagates the importance of gender equality and women's empowerment in meetings related to the SDGs, and series review processes on the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) and the 4WCW. However, China has not developed a consistent and coherent position on gender-related issues in its foreign policy, compared to other more prominent areas such as trade, investment, security, human rights, counterterrorism and climate change (Cai 2021). Moreover, commitment on gender equality and women's rights is on occasion traded off for other priority issues, or compromised in the name of non-interference. For instance, China refused to use the phrase "women's human rights defenders" in the Asia Pacific Ministerial

Meeting in Beijing+25 due to “lack of consensus on the definition” (Cai 2021).

4.2 Non-conditionality vs. extraterritorial obligation: Framing gender in South-South cooperation

China is signatory to many international human rights treaties such as the CEDAW, ICESCR, CRC and CRPD, all of which contain the principle of gender equality. China, like all countries that signed and ratified these conventions, is obliged to report periodically about the progress made on implementing these treaties to the relevant treaty bodies.

Although these obligations are primarily applied in the domestic jurisdiction, states do have extraterritorial obligations. The “General comment No. 24 (2017) on State obligations under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in the context of business activities” states that “the Covenant establishes specific obligations of State parties at three levels – to respect, to protect and to fulfil. These obligations apply both with respect to situations on the State’s national territory, and outside the national territory in situations over which State parties may exercise control (para 10)”. “Extraterritorial obligations arise when a State may influence situations located outside its territory, consistent with the limits imposed by international law, by controlling the activities of corporations domiciled in its territory and/or under its jurisdiction, and thus may contribute to the effective enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights outside its national territory (para 28)” (E/C.12/GC/24, 10 August 2017). As a signatory to this covenant, these terms apply to Chinese overseas investments and development. In recent years, Chinese government ministries collectively issued

numerous foreign investment and finance guidelines on environmental protection and social responsibilities.

China's international development cooperation is guided by principles of non-interference, non-conditionality and reciprocity, and is located within the South-South cooperation framework. Its efforts to promote gender equality in the global South focus on three themes, namely health care, education and economic empowerment. This approach is best manifested in a white paper titled "China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era" (SCIO 2021). In Chapter IV on SDGs, especially in relation to SDG5 on gender equality and women's empowerment, the paragraph on "Safeguarding Women's Rights and Interests" highlights China's efforts to improve maternal and child health programmes in the global South. The paragraph on "Empowering Women" mentions vocational and technical training to increase women's employment and their participation in political and economic activities in developing countries. The document does not provide a comprehensive approach or strategy to mainstream gender in international development cooperation. In the same vein, health care, training, exchange and education are the main activities in the China-Africa cooperation. The China Africa Cooperation Action Plan (2022-2024) includes some new areas with more details such as increasing women's professional training in the infrastructure sector, creating jobs for women through Chinese manufacturing investments, enhancing reproductive health, including women in the information technology sector, training policewomen, and organising exchanges between female politicians and high-level officials.

4.3 Between rhetoric and reality: Gender impact of Chinese investments and trade in the global South

There is a significant amount of literature and NGO reports on the environmental and social impacts of Chinese overseas investments (Tower 2020, Shieh et al. 2021), but very few specifically examine the impact of trade and investments on gender equality in the host country. Some of these research findings are summarised below.

Lu et al. (2018) analyse the gap between the international standards on gender equality in transnational trade, foreign investments and aid projects with China's overseas investments and aid programmes. For instance, while China has ratified the CEDAW and committed to SDG5 on gender equality and other human rights standards, these commitments have not yet translated into gender equality policies in Chinese overseas development or aid programmes due to the lack of adequate knowledge about gender equality in the receiving countries, nor is there strong political will on the part of China to fulfil its gender equality commitments. Thus, the authors recommend policy improvements to ensure that gender equality is mainstreamed in BRI projects. Huang et al. (2019) document the gender awareness of Chinese agriculture companies investing in Laos and Cambodia. Liang (2019) studies Chinese investments in textile and apparel enterprises in Vietnam, Myanmar and Bangladesh, and through surveys and interviews with workers and the managerial staff, investigates how these investments affect local women workers on the factory floor. Zhao et al. (2021) identify some good practices and policies of IFIs on gender-responsive investments, which could be

role models for Chinese financial institutions. Delfau and Yeophantong (2020) survey how women in riparian communities in the Mekong region are connected to the rivers, and how they can use their unique abilities and collective sense of responsibility to bring about change, including facing the impact of hydropower projects financed by China. Shieh and his team interview villagers impacted by Chinese BRI investments in Nepal and Zambia, and list the gender-related social risks (Shieh et al. 2021).

The above-mentioned literature reveals the complexity of BRI's impacts on women and local communities in the host countries. The positive impacts include job creation and training for women in the agriculture (Huang et al. 2018) and textile industries (Liang 2019). However, there are negative impacts in the form of environmental degradation resulting from infrastructure investments; the failure to protect women's rights under contract farming, including the dilution of land titles; no social and health insurance; repercussions of the use of pesticides on health; waste pile-up; waste burning and polluted water (Huang et al. 2018). In the textile industry, Liang (2019) identifies Chinese managerial staff's gender stereotypes and lack of gender sensitivity, which lead to gender wage gaps, lack of facilities for breastfeeding and childcare, and the lack of mechanisms to prevent and manage sexual harassment in the workplace.

Chinese overseas investments primarily focus on infrastructure, extractive industries and energy. International agencies and CSOs have developed guidelines and toolkits that illustrate the gender impacts of these investments, and proposed policy interventions to improve gender equality. For example, UN Women and the

United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) have commissioned four guides on integrating gender into infrastructure development in Asia and the Pacific. Oxfam has developed two useful guidelines for gender impact assessments in mining (Hill et al. 2017) and hydropower development (Michael 2013). Social Development Direct (2000) has also developed a series of guides, sector-specific briefs and case studies on addressing gender-based violence and harassment risks in public transport, construction and manufacturing. All of these would be useful references for Chinese investors and development programmes.

From the existing literature, we have observed that the Chinese official discourse on gender equality and women's development is being corroborated in development practice – gender is defined as a binary concept and framed under responsible investment, in which women are computed as valuable economic assets. Both the discourse and the practice suggest that by improving women's rights and empowerment, socially responsible and sustainable investment can be realised. However, much of the current research centres on Chinese investors rather than local communities and, in particular, the experiences and perspectives of women and marginalised members in these communities. In addition, this research is confined within the environment, social and governance (ESG) and corporate social responsibility (CSR) frameworks, and neglects unequal multidimensional power relations between international investors, political and economic elites of the host countries, and local communities. It also rarely pays attention to the importance of an intersectional understanding of gender, class, race, age, culture, SOGI and religion. We believe there are many gaps yet to be identified, such as media, culture, education and migration, and examined

through the lens of gender and sexuality. Due to the paucity of literature, we could not include all of these aspects in this framework. We welcome researchers who are interested in these issues to do exploratory research on them.

In the next section, we will discuss how the framework of Global China and Southern feminist analysis could be applied to understand the gender impact of China's global engagement, and address the research gaps identified in this framework through grounded empirical research from the global South.

5. Examining “Global China” from the global South feminist lens

China's global engagement and its impacts are profound and diverse, but studies on its gender impact remain scarce. Current research topics focus on China's foreign aid and overseas investments, especially BRI investments, in various sectors in the global South. In terms of the framework and methodology, a majority of the existing studies are rooted in the disciplines of IR, political science and political economy that frame China's global engagement within the China-US rivalry, competition in the global South and geopolitics among powerful states (Wang 2016). Some of this research views China Going Global from the state and interstate perspectives, and uses the Chinese government's policies, guidelines and databases monitoring global trade and investment as main data sources. However, some of this data may not be accurate due to the opaque and ambiguous nature of Chinese public data, and due to different data classifications. Documents such as government policies or legal papers can also be misunderstood and misinterpreted, and biases and prejudices can be introduced by various political positionalities. Hence, research which relies only on textual analysis could potentially become trapped in oversimplified discourse such as neocolonialism, debt-trap diplomacy and the new Cold War, or label or stigmatise China as a “monster” and sow discord in its relationships with other nations. Such research

could overlook diverse and dynamic relationship building on the ground, which can only be observed through empirical fieldwork. Moreover, the current literature focuses mostly on the agenda of the government and businesses, including Chinese SOEs, private investors and IFIs. Very little attention is paid to other stakeholders such as local communities impacted by China's policies and development/investment projects, and civil society and its role and impact at the local, national and global levels. Even in research looking at the environmental governance aspect, a gender perspective is rare.

Against this backdrop, DAWN intends to collaborate with researchers from the global South and deploy a Southern feminist perspective to unpack China's global engagement, and contribute to knowledge production and policy formulation that is mindful of gender equality and women's rights. This research would apply the framework and mixed methodologies discussed in this paper to carry out empirical research in different regions of the global South. The following section introduces the preliminary thoughts to guide this joint endeavour.

5.1 The emerging field of Global China studies

Ching Kwan Lee (2017) calls for abandoning methodological nationalism and treating Global China as a subject of sociological inquiry. This emerging field is not merely driven by the imperative to track the rise of China and its global impact, but also propelled by the impetus of "the global turn" (Darian-Smith and McCarty 2017) within academia, which seeks to shift the scope of research from regional and country-specific contexts towards the global. Global China studies focuses on micro level and detailed cases; uses power relations as the analytical framework;

asks questions about who, why and so what among multiple actors; and observes the power dynamic among them, such as resisting, bargaining, accommodating, appropriating and adapting. It offers alternative perspectives to understand China and global South relations, and applies interdisciplinary and intersectional approaches to study literature, culture and history, in addition to economics and politics.

First, Global China studies enables scholars to form new research questions and look for a new framework to interrogate the over-simplified dominant narratives on China and its global engagement – a neo imperialist hegemonic power, a neocolonial force, the China Threat Theory and the messiah vs. monster thesis (Lee 2017, Rofel et al. 2023, Al-Rodhan 2007, Kinyondo 2019). The messiah vs. monster thesis, for instance, relies on a set of dichotomous views of geopolitics based on twentieth century Cold War logic. China's current engagement with the global South can, instead, be viewed as part of a multiple, heterogenous and ongoing process of "new world orderings" (Rofel et al. 2013). Al-Rodhan (2007) contends that methodologically the China Threat Theory is misleading and counterproductive. More specifically, we argue that the most detrimental effect of the China Threat Theory is that it creates a binary antagonistic (mis)perception that peaceful coexistence is impossible, and conflict is an inevitable outcome in international relations. This logic allows no room to imagine a multipolar world order or alternative worldmaking, which is the goal that many developing countries have been longing for and struggling to achieve since they gained independence from colonial rule.

Second, Global China studies does not see China as a monolithic entity. It calls for abandoning methodological nationalism and state-centred frameworks, and debunks Eurocentric, US-centric or China-centric epistemologies. This has already been discussed using the exemplary research conducted by Ching Kwan Lee (2017), Oliveira et al. (2021), Alden et al. (2019) and Rofel et al. (2023).

Third, as an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary field of research, Global China studies intersects with other fields and accommodates mixed methods, making the field a fertile new ground for knowledge production. It transcends the perennial focus on trade and development-based research, which is analysed all too often in the discipline of IR. Culture and sociality are significant and warrant further study; this trend has been unfolding in recent years in studies on China-Africa and China-Latin America relations (Rofel et al. 2023, Amar 2021, Liu 2021, Alden, 2019), and in studies on Chinese migration and overseas workers (Yan et al. 2019, Nyiri 2020, Schmitz 2020, Zhu 2020, Franceschini 2020, Coates 2020). For example, Paul Amar (2021) combines a Third World feminist lens, the Asia as Method approach and queer studies to offer a deimperial queer analysis to decode the 2017 landmark Chinese blockbuster "Wolf Warrior 2", and reveals the geopolitical tension between China's extractive expansionism in Africa and its claim of solidarity with Africa against white supremacy and Northern imperialism. Mingwei Huang (2022) and Huynh (2022) examine Chinese migrants in South Africa and African migrants in China, respectively. Their research on the newer waves of South-South immigrants between China and Africa brings issues of race and development to the forefront of migration studies, and reveals a process of worldmaking that has been described as a "globalisation from below" (Rofel et al.

2022).

The current literature on Global China studies shows that the emerging field faces many challenges. The first challenge is thrown up by the methodological, epistemological and ontological questions concerning the politics of knowledge and power. In the field of Africa-China studies, for example, much current research is written in English by scholars from the global North. Hountondji (2009) and Mbembe (2021) argue that the study of Africa has been part of a Western initiated and controlled project of knowledge accumulation, and hence adding new players does not necessarily change the rules of the game. Moreover, in contrast to the overwhelming interest in studying China in Africa, there is less research within Chinese academia to examine Africa's influence on China (Alden et al. 2019). So, the question is: would the new trend in Africa-China studies and Global China studies provide an alternative theoretical framework and transform methodologies so as to advance scholarship that no longer situates Africa and/or China at the margin and as the "other"?

The second challenge is the remaining knowledge gap in the field of Global China studies, as much of the research focuses on the state, business sectors and state-led initiatives, and gender issues remain understudied. Alden et al. (2019) admit that gender is one of the omitted aspects of China-Africa studies.

It is encouraging to note the increasing research on gender and China's global engagement in recent years, especially in migration and diaspora-related analysis, for example, Huynh's research (2022) on African women traders in Guangzhou, China. Research on Chinese firms by Oya et al. (2019) and Xu (2022) brings to light

the significance of gendered labour force segmentation, and race- and class-based encounters between Chinese employers and African women workers. For example, labour markets in the construction and manufacturing sectors in Ethiopia are highly gendered, with women constituting a majority of the factory workforce, especially in low-skilled jobs. More women are present in the construction sector in Ethiopia compared to Angola, where women's labour force participation is concentrated overwhelmingly in the agriculture and services sectors. In Chinese family-based garment firms in South Africa, Chinese employers attempt to impose and exploit racial hierarchies as a means of increasing production, even as Zulu women workers respond to managerial control. All of this research reflects how gender norms with regards to employment vary across countries.

Petrus Liu (2021) interrogates the meaning-making of gender in contemporary China's global engagement. He highlights the parallel between the Beijing Consensus and Chinese concepts of gender as same-but-different "globalizations" to show that "gender in China is not only a discursive formation, but also a material geopolitical practice embedded in a larger struggle to define China's role in the world economy and its relation to the global South". This argument seems to echo Liu and Dunford's conclusion that China's BRI is designed to lay some of the foundations for "a new inclusive phase of globalization", which the authors define as "inclusive globalization", different from neoliberal globalisation (or Washington Consensus) that is characterised by privatisation, deregulation and win-lose competition between unequal participants (Liu and Dunford 2016).

Both Cai (2021) and Lu (2019) suggest that gender and human rights should be integrated into China's global engagement and the BRI to ensure that the country's overseas investments and aid programmes uphold its international human rights obligations, and are aligned with its commitments on gender equality. However, there is not much empirical evidence on the gender impact of BRI projects on local communities in the global South. In other words, this argument remains largely deductive and hypothetical.

5.2 Centring Southern feminist analysis

The gender impact of Chinese global engagement is an important but understudied subject. As mentioned earlier, the official Chinese narrative on gender, whether in the domestic or international arena, is narrowly defined, focusing predominantly on women's economic empowerment, health care and education. Much of China's investments and many of its international aid projects are related to infrastructure, mining, energy and agriculture. With Chinese investors' awareness on gender equality remaining inadequate, these development projects are often gender blind in design and implementation, and may potentially intensify gender inequality in the host countries.

Women in the global South are often seen as vulnerable victims of development projects (Escobar 1995). However, empirical research conducted by Southern feminist scholars reveals women as subjects with agency, capable of fighting for equality and justice (Sen et al. 1987, Visanathan et al. 2011). For example, Cambodian women are at the frontlines of the resistance to land grabbing for urban development projects and new airport building projects by Chinese

investors (Higgins 2012, Sokun 2019). Southern feminist analysis and advocacy on the issue of gender and development since the 1980s have produced much valuable knowledge which can be applied to analyse the gender impact of China's global engagement, and reflect on the narrative and practice of South-South cooperation and border development theories and practice. Centring these critical perspectives and experiences in related research and policy advocacy is an urgent task.

It is encouraging to observe how environmental NGOs and advocates work collaboratively and unwaveringly on China's global environmental footprint through solid research and social mobilisation. They advocate for more sustainable and greener investments, including greater investments in renewable energy. Their long-term efforts have gained momentum as Chinese authorities have committed to publish environmental protection guidelines for Chinese overseas investments and development projects. The industry associations have also set industry standards, put in place supply chain due diligence and fostered capacity building on environmental protection for their members.

5.3 DAWN's proposal for case studies on gender impact of China's global engagement

An important point to keep in mind is that any analysis of gender and Global China cannot avoid a discussion on the concept of gender itself – how it is being defined, by whom, in what political, socio-economic and cultural context, and why. Another important reminder is to analyse the intersections of gender with other socioeconomic and cultural factors such as class, race, age, disabilities and

beliefs, among others. These issues are controversial and hotly debated in local and global gender politics, especially amid the rise of anti-gender movements across the world.

As a Southern feminist network, DAWN intends to collaborate with researchers from the global South to conduct exploratory research addressing the following questions:

- What role does gender play in China's global engagement and its efforts at exercising "soft power", for example, in China's strategic engagement in multilateral mechanisms such as the UN and other new institutions, and/or in negotiations of bilateral or multilateral trade agreements; its initiation of South-South cooperation narratives and practices; and its implementation of multilateral financiers' social and environmental safeguards?
- How do Chinese BRI investment projects and other international development aid projects influence gender equality, women's lives and their human rights in local communities and neighbourhoods, and in the formal and/or the informal economy?
- Do Chinese overseas investments and development programmes differ from those of other countries in terms of gender policies and gender-related impact assessments? If so, how? If not, why?
- How do Southern feminists, civil society groups and social movements strengthen women's rights and gender equality, and obtain social and environmental justice in the face of potentially adverse impacts of Chinese

foreign aid and investments?

The choice of case studies could follow China's global footprint and look at cases of Chinese aid/investments in infrastructure, energy, agriculture and extractive sectors, and/or Chinese aid/investments in conflict areas or humanitarian settings in Africa, Asia, the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean. Each case could look at a specific sector, for example, mining in Ecuador, agriculture in Kenya, infrastructure projects in Nepal and so on, to build an in-depth analysis.

We welcome interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research methodologies and mixed data collection methods. Historical and comparative analyses that could help contextualise the research theme are also encouraged. The research is expected to contribute to knowledge on the gender impact of China's global engagement by meeting the following criteria:

- Applying Southern feminist perspectives and exploring the interlinkage of gender, economic and ecological justice (GEEJ). The research should not be merely limited to women's empowerment within the CSR or business and human rights framework.
- Conducting empirical research to identify the gaps between rhetoric and practice, and between policy on paper and on-ground reality.
- Exploring women's agency rather than reiterating the narrative of victimisation of women and affected communities.
- Focusing on dynamic power relations and politics of human rights.

- Identifying policy recommendations and/or advocacy messages for target audiences, governments, investors, managerial staff, local communities and activists.

In conclusion, this framework paper is based on the review of existing literature on China's global engagement and its gender impact in the global South. It serves as a basis for exploratory research on this theme that DAWN and its partners would conduct in the future. It proposes to examine Global China from a Southern feminist perspective, as the new framework and methodology to generate grounded knowledge from below and the margins, with the aim of shifting multi-dimensional unequal power relations and exploring alternative narratives and practices towards gender and development justice.

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