

The Evolution of Mutual Benefit in China's Foreign Aid Policy

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Abstract

Explicitly stating that its aid giving is based on the principle of mutual benefit is a distinctive feature of China's foreign aid. How the mutual benefit principle is interpreted in China's aid policy and why it remains perhaps the most durable aid principle over time is worth investigating. By comprehensively reviewing Chinese policy briefs and reports, white papers, government documents and speeches, this article finds that while mutual benefit has been a basic principle, the Chinese government's statement and its role in the aid policy has continuously varied over the years. During Mao's period, the mutual benefit was introduced as a basic principle but its importance was limited due to the country's policy statement indicating more the beneficiaries' benefit. Then after the Reform and Opening policy in 1978, mutual benefit moved to the centre of China's aid policy statement. Following the turn of the new century, particularly after 2011, China's aid policy again pays more attention to recipient interest, and the importance of stressing mutual benefit decreased. The flexible use of mutual benefit is an important characteristic while it has remained a central element. Additionally, because self-interest is an integral part of mutual benefit, it fits with China's pragmatic thinking on foreign aid, legitimizes the goal of China pursuing economic interests, softens the tone of China pursuing its political interests and to some extent alleviates the domestic critics on China's aid relations. The main conclusion is that Chinese aid would benefit from more conceptual clarity with respect to mutual benefit and a more stable application over time.

Keywords: *Foreign aid, mutual benefit, 'Eight Principles', Four Principles, Foreign Aid White Paper, China*

1. Introduction

In the post-Cold War period, a recipient-centred narrative dominated the discourse on providing aid. The classic Official Development Assistance (ODA) definition requires aid expenditure to strive for the “promotion of the economic development and welfare of developing countries as its main objective” (OECD, 2020). Consequently, academic research and independent evaluations take this recipient-centred rationale as a starting point when analyzing development policies and practices. However, the discourse on development has seen some changes. The concept of enlightened self-interest, or emphasizing the donor’s interest when giving aid, is receiving increasing attention in the development community. It has been pointed out that some Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) members (i.e., the UK, Denmark, the Netherlands and the EU) have gone further by discussing aid motives in more self-interested discourse, irrespective of their position on increasing or decreasing ODA budgets (Keijzer and Lundsgaarde, 2018). Hulme (2016: 5) also argues that rich nations should help the poor not only because it is the morally right thing to do but also in the “pursuit of self-interest, indeed the future wellbeing of rich world citizens (our children and grandchildren).” Similarly, Glennie (2021: 10, 105) boldly proposes new paradigm shifts in how we talk about aid. Foreign aid that is presented as a charitable gift and as money transfers from rich to poor countries has proved to be outdated and embarrassing. Consequently, a new vision for “global public investment” (e.g., spending on global goods and services) with returns for contributors (donors) and recipients is more appropriate to today’s reality.

Whereas the concept of mutual benefit has only recently become *salonfähig* in the Global North, donors from the Global South seem to have been working on the enlightening self-interest concern for many decades. They have practically shaped this self-interest concern with the formulation of a win-win or mutual benefit policy on foreign aid. As one of the most prominent donors of the Global South, China mentions its foreign aid giving is not a form of charity but based on the principle of mutual benefit. Since its first appearance in China’s official aid document in 1964, which was titled ‘China’s Eight Principles for Foreign Economic and Technical Assistance’ (Eight Principles), ‘mutual benefit’ has been seen as the most common phrase in China’s official reports and speeches when introducing its foreign aid policy. During the Davos World Economic Forum, Chairman Xi highlighted that the goal of China’s foreign aid was to deliver mutual benefit and that one of the leading drivers of China-led globalization would be China’s partnership with developing countries (Johnston and Rudyak, 2017). At the Forums on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), Xi also repeatedly stressed that China’s cooperation with African countries works based on “mutual benefit, reciprocity and common prosperity” (Hanauer and Morris, 2014; Zhang, M., 2018).

The explicit statement that foreign aid giving is based on the principle of mutual benefit is considered to be a distinctive feature of China's foreign aid. However, while repeatedly reiterating the importance of mutual benefit from the Chinese government, it is still difficult to understand due to the complex and changing aid policies and practices in China. Previous studies either focus on introducing China's aid policy generally (Kobayashi, 2008: 34; Lancaster, 2009; Liu, N., 2006) or have concentrated on assessing the mutual benefit principle by either arguing China is a "rogue donor" pursuing only self-interest (Alves, 2013; Hodzi et al., 2012; Naím, 2007) or is a messiah to recipients that can bring benefit to local development (Chen, Y., 2015; Dreher and Fuchs, 2015; Kilama, 2016). But these still bring less help with capturing what the principle really means and why China persists in it in its foreign aid. It is therefore interesting to have a look at how the mutual benefit principle is interpreted and applied in China's aid policy and what significance this principle has for aid from China.

Although China is called an emerging donor, it has given aid for more than six decades. During this time, China's aid policy has evolved as evidenced by the release of its central aid documents entitled 'China's Eight Principles for Foreign Economic and Technical Assistance' (Eight Principles, 1964), 'Four Principles of Sino-African Economic and Technological Cooperation' (Four Principles, 1983), and China's Foreign Aid White Paper (2011). Although China's aid policy changes continuously, mutual benefit has always been a basic aid principle in those three documents. Thus, this requires us to see China's application of its mutual benefit principle first and foremost from a perspective of policy dynamics. Against this background, the article first asks: "How is the mutual benefit principle interpreted in China's foreign aid policy and what are the major changes of its policy discourse addressing the principle across different periods?" Then the article continues to investigate "why mutual benefit has remained a durable principle in China's foreign aid policy over time?" By answering this question we intend to contribute to the literature on foreign aid in general and Chinese aid in particular. Both bodies of literature have had difficulties in conceptualizing 'mutual benefit' and we aim to contribute to this by providing a systematic overview of mutual benefit in Chinese aid policy documents. The intention of this research is also to have an impact on aid practice: since there is currently a lack of understanding what is meant with mutual benefit, the label can be misused, allowing for ambiguities to persist. In the conclusion, we make some suggestions to reduce these ambiguities.

Considering both changes in China's overall domestic and foreign policy and the evolution of its leading government aid documents, we divide the analysis into three periods: the first period begins in the early years of aid giving in the 1950s and continues to the adoption of the Reform and Opening

policy in 1978; the second period begins in 1978 and continues into the new century; and the third period, which is ongoing, begins in 2010 when China began to follow a more assertive foreign policy, and published its first White Paper on aid in 2011.

Based on the timeline, this article adopts a discourse analysis approach to examine how the mutual benefit term is addressed by the Chinese government in each period. Two categories of documents are distinguished in this research. The first category specifically refers to the three leading official aid policy documents mentioned above. These central aid policy documents provide a solid foundation for discourse analysis of China's foreign aid policy. The second category includes supporting (complementary) documents, comprising mainly of a selection of government reports and working papers, and speeches and publications of Chinese leaders. Annual reports and working papers from the Ministry of Commerce, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA) are also important sources here. China's aid policy and thoughts are often scattered among those comprehensive documents, reports and presentations. The key part of the discourse analysis is understanding the concept of mutual benefit in the Chinese aid context. For this reason, it is vital that we thoroughly and systematically investigate the context of the mutual benefit discourse. Several questions are considered in the process: (1) What is the discourse of mutual benefit for the Chinese government? (2) What is the purpose and what are the aims of the discourse for China? (3) When and where the discourse takes place? (4) Who created the discourse and who consumed? (5) What factors would contribute to the existence and evolution of the discourse. Then we zoomed in on the mutual benefit statement by coding statements reflecting principles such as 'win-win cooperation' (双赢), 'common interest' (共同利益), 'righteousness and interest' (义和利), 'seeking something mutual' (求同), 'the needs of both sides' (双方共同利益), and other related terms. This article looks in particular at the interpretation of the mutual benefit concept that is used in China's aid policy documents and how this discourse has shifted and expressed over a long period. Then the analysis on what factors can influence the discourse continues by taking into account China's economic, political and social transformation in a complex historical and current background. By doing this, we assess and explain why mutual benefit remains a durable aid principle in China's aid policy over periods.

2. The Establishment of the Mutual Benefit Principle in the Early Years of China's Aid

The People's Republic of China (China) has a long history of providing aid to other developing countries. In many ways, Chinese aid started with its

support for the proletarian revolutionary movements in the early 1950s by providing aid to socialist neighbours, such as North Korea, North Vietnam and Mongolia. Following the Bandung Conference in 1955, China rapidly expanded its aid to non-socialist countries in Asia and Africa, including Cambodia (1956), Nepal (1956), Indonesia (1956), Burma (now Myanmar, 1958), Laos (1961), Guinea (1958), Ghana (1961), Tanzania (1964), Zambia (1964) and more. Economic and technical cooperation between China and developing countries in Asia and Africa had been improved considerably with the increase in China's foreign aid. To effectively develop and implement China's foreign aid, the Chinese government formulated the Eight Principles as a set of guidelines for its foreign aid and announced them to the world during Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai's visit to African countries in 1964.

As Chinese scholars pointed out, "the 'Eight Principles' united the thoughts of agencies and staff involved in foreign aid, and those actors conscientiously carried out the Eight Principles, regardless of the type of aid, type of projects, scale, standards, etc." (Zhou, H. and Xiong, 2017: 5–6). Originally derived and developed from the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence and the spirit of the Bandung Conference, the Eight Principles set several basic rules for China's foreign aid at that time. Mutual benefits, along with other considerations, such as non-interference and self-reliance development, is put forward as a basic principle of China's foreign aid policy.

Although mutual benefit was taken up as a guiding principle, China's primary policy statement showed an expression of "caring more about the benefit of recipients" and "meeting recipient's needs" at that time. According to the main text of the Eight Principles, the Chinese government indicated clearly that its aid never attaches any conditions or asks for any privileges (see Appendix 1, Principle 2 in Eight Principles). In terms of financial modalities, China's aid was given mainly in the form of grants and low-interest loans (see Principle 3). The cardinal guideline of Chinese loan provision was to lighten the burden of recipient countries as much as possible. For further explanation, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai introduced that Chinese loans have four characteristics: no or very low interest; long-term repayment period, long-term grace period that can also be extended, and even the possibility of no payback (Liu, C. and Chen, 1996: 656). Chairman Mao Zedong also frequently emphasized that Chinese loan-giving was relatively flexible, which means that the grace period could be extended or the debts could be written off if the recipients had difficulty repaying them (Mao, 1994: 249). Regarding the implementation of aid projects, the Chinese government set itself high standards to satisfy the needs of the recipients. On one hand, Chinese aid projects should achieve quick results so that the recipient government could increase its income and accumulate capital rapidly (Principle 5), and on the other hand, China should provide the recipients with the best-quality

equipment and materials produced in China (Principle 6). The effectiveness of aid giving also requires China to fully transfer its knowledge and technology to recipient countries (Principle 7) and would help them to achieve self-reliance and independent development (Principle 4).

Indeed, prioritizing the interests of recipient countries became the main guideline of China's aid policy in the early period. This is associated with Mao Zedong's internationalism thinking, which saw assisting the people and nations that were fighting for their independence and liberation as China's internationalism obligation that it could not reject. In an official report regarding how to guide China's foreign aid work, vice prime ministers Chen Yi and Li Fuchun who took charge of China's foreign aid work, then stated that "foreign aid is an internationalist obligation to unite other brotherhood countries, and thus it is a serious political task for China" (XNA, 1958). Thus, when countries like Vietnam, North Korea and Albania asked for help from China, Mao Zedong without hesitation started to provide assistance. After the Bandung Conference, Mao Zedong decided to expand the scale of aid from the socialist camp to non-socialist countries by providing goods and materials for production and living, and even military aid to assist the battle for national independence in Asia and Africa (Chen, S., 2017: 62). As he pointed out, "helping those socialist countries that are in need is an internationalist issue and an obligation of the Communists.... China, after the victory in the revolution, will make every possible effort to assist nations and people in the oppressed Asian, African and Latin American countries in fighting for their independence and liberation (Mao, 1999: 115–116)." Thus, China's aid policy statement in the early period portrays an image of attaching great importance to the needs and interests of the recipients.

3. Development of the Mutual Benefit After the 1978 Reform and Opening-up Policy

China experienced a tremendous change in 1978. By launching the reform and opening-up policy, the country's main task shifted from promoting an anti-Western, anti-imperialist and socialist ideology to advancing its national interests, which were defined almost wholly in terms of economic development (Copper, 2016: 19). China's foreign aid policy was revised to adapt to this new situation. China's de facto leader, Deng Xiaoping, expounded that China should keep stressing the Eight Principles of Foreign Aid but that the principles needed to be revised and improved, both to benefit recipient countries and to adapt to the situation of China (Deng, 1994b: 112; Shi and Lv, 1989: 70). Against this background, Chairman Zhao Ziyang proposed a new version of the aid document when he visited Egypt, Algeria and 11 other African countries from December 1983 to January 1984. This

document is called the Four Principles of Sino-African Economic and Technological Cooperation (hereafter, referred to as the Four Principles), which has been the guiding document for China's aid policy since the 1980s.

The Four Principles are the inheritance and development of the Eight Principles that were drawn up in 1964, under new national conditions and practice following the Reform and Opening in 1978. They entail several core guidelines of equality and mutual benefit, focusing on practical results, diversity in form, and the attainment of common progress when giving aid to other countries (Zhou, H., 2008). In comparison to the Eight Principles, the Four Principles strongly highlighted the importance of mutual benefit and the need for China's aid giving to meet the interest of both sides.

In detail, as opposed to helping recipients achieve self-reliance and independent development in the Eight Principles, the Four Principles stressed that both parties could learn from each other's strengths, and they should help each other to enhance mutual self-reliance and to develop the national economies of both sides (see Appendix 2, Principle 4). The Chinese government began to emphasize that China itself was a developing country, that its aid worked in the framework of South-South cooperation, and that China itself should be able to benefit from the process of aid giving (Chen, S., 2017: 159). In addition, the Four Principles (Principle 3) also allowed China to make small profits while recipients also benefitted. Thus, China's aid-giving modalities also experienced substantial changes: from the earlier grants and interest-free loans that were intended to lighten the burden of recipient countries as much as possible to a variety of forms, including technological exchanges, contract-engineering projects, co-production, joint ventures and other forms of cooperation. With the expansion of the cooperative approach and scale, China believed that it could forge a closer integration of its interests with those of the recipients, and long-term technical and managerial cooperation would also be established (Zhou, H. and Xiong, 2017: 27).

After the implementation of the reform and opening-up policy, the main tasks for China were to develop its national economy and promote modernization. China's foreign policy and strategy also make a turn, becoming increasingly pragmatic, and shifting to focus and serve China's economic development (Deng, 1994a: 57; Wang, Y., 2011). Against this background, there was a debate on whether China should remain a donor when its limited available resources were needed for domestic development. In response, Deng Xiaoping confirmed that aid would be continued because China's position in the world is inseparable from its support of friendly countries, especially Third World countries. Although China now faced economic difficulties, it would still offer the necessary amount of aid and China would provide more when it achieved development (Deng, 1994a; Shi and Lv, 1989: 69). Thus, when giving aid, China changed its aid practice from

“taking no economic account” in the past to developing equal and mutually beneficial economic cooperation with other developing countries. Aid from China became increasingly pragmatic and shifted to focus on serving the country’s economic development. Being pragmatic and pursuing “mutual benefit and common development” become essential guidelines in China’s aid policy after the reform and opening up (Huang, 2007).

4. Adjustment of the Mutual Benefit Principle from 2010 Onwards

China’s foreign aid has witnessed significant growth in volume and scale since the second decade of the 21st century. From 2013 to 2018, the Chinese government is estimated to have provided a total of RMB270.2 billion (approximately US\$40 billion at the current exchange rate) in development finance by way of grants, interest-free loans and concessional loans (The State Council, 2021). China has rapidly grown as an emerging donor with a volume (both ODA and other official flows) that can rival that of other major donors and lenders (Dreher et al., 2017; Kitano and Harada, 2016). In 2013, China announced an ambitious plan: the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aims to construct a modern Silk Road that connects a vast region covering Asia, Europe and Africa. To support the BRI, two financial arrangements were established: the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Silk Road Fund (SRF), which combined, added up to US\$100 billion stated for infrastructure financing along the BRI regions. Moreover, China has also created a massive platform of public and private funds in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe and Latin America, including the China–Africa Development Fund, the China–ASEAN Investment Cooperation Fund, and China and Central and Eastern European Countries 16+1 Fund (Kamal and Gallagher, 2016).

China’s aid policy against this background has experienced an adjustment again. The Foreign Aid White Paper released in 2011 became the first official aid document to comprehensively introduce China’s foreign aid policy in the new century. In this White Paper, several elements of the previous Four Principles have been removed, including the stipulations that China’s aid projects should require low investment while yielding rapid results, and that Chinese workers should have the same living conditions as their local peers. These guidelines are no longer part of China’s official statement on foreign aid. In the meantime, there are some new developments in China’s aid policy, namely the mention that China’s aid should keep pace with the times and pay attention to reform and innovation. Although the White Paper has seen several changes, mutual benefit is still retained as an important principle in the new aid policy document. But the main discourse of China’s aid policy regarding the mutual benefit concept is seen differently again.

China's new policy statement shifts again to favour the interest of recipients. The guidelines that China's aid giving must "meet the needs of both sides" in the previous document have been changed to "accommodate recipient countries' interests" and "meet the actual needs of recipients" (see Appendix 3, Principles 3 and 4) in the 2011 Aid White Paper. The Aid White Paper further explains that China's aid, on the one hand, provides foreign aid within the reach of its abilities under its national conditions but, on the other, gives full play to its comparative advantages and does its utmost to tailor its aid to meet the needs of its recipients (China State Council, 2011). Additionally, China no longer stresses that "aid should help each other to achieve mutual self-reliance and develop both national economies." Instead, in its White Paper, China says that it will unremittingly help recipients build up their self-development capacity, foster local personnel and technical forces, build infrastructure, and develop and use domestic resources (see Appendix 3, Principle 1).

China's following government documents and speeches make a clear statement on the principle of mutual benefit, which is known as upholding the "correct sense of justice" (正确义利观, zheng que yi li guan). The notion was first introduced by Xi when talking about win-win relations during his Africa tour in March 2013. Then Foreign Minister Wang Yi further elaborated Xi's statement in the *People's Daily* newspaper later in the year. In his article, titled "Upholding the correct sense of justice, and actively playing the responsible role of great powers," Wang described Xi's "correct sense of justice" as follows:

'Justice' (义, yi) reflects our credos, the principles of communists and socialist nations. In the world today, some people live comfortable lives while others do not. This is not a good situation. True wellbeing and happiness come when everyone is well and happy. We want a world where everyone develops together. We particularly want to see developing nations achieve rapid development. As for 'interests' (利, li), this means sticking to the principle of mutually beneficial win-win relations. Rather than one side winning and another losing, both must be winners. We are duty-bound to do all we can to assist poor nations. Sometimes, we must prioritize ethics and justice over our own interests; sometimes, we must forfeit our own interests for the sake of ethics and justice. We must never pursue our own interests alone, or think only in terms of gain and loss.

(Wang, Y., 2013; cited in Kawashima, 2019)

Dealing with the relationship between "justice" and "benefit" and the concept that China should uphold the "correct sense of justice" becomes the main statement of China's aid policy. It briefly means that China will give more consideration to the recipient's interest while pursuing its own

– China will even sacrifice self-interest when necessary. This has become a key diplomatic tenet and a crucial guideline for foreign aid in China (Zhang, Y., 2018). In the years following Wang’s article, the phrase “correct sense of justice” has been repeated dozens of times by Chinese leaders in public speeches or reports. During the Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs (中央外事工作会, Zhongyang waishi gongzuo hui), Xi stated that China will adhere to the correct view of “justice” and “benefit,” putting the latter at the core of all thinking, and taking morality as the starting point in solving problems (Men, 2020: 185; XNA, 2014). At the opening ceremony of the 2015 FOCAC Summit, Xi delivered a keynote on cooperation between China and African countries. He said that justice and interest are seen as two equally important parts of a whole, but that justice must come first and self-interest second; to African countries, China will always prioritize justice (Xi, 2017a: 456). At the following FOCAC Beijing Summit in 2018, Xi again stressed that China would follow the principles of “giving more and taking less,” “giving before taking” and “giving without asking in return” (Xi, 2020: 430).

5. Significance of Stressing Mutual Benefit in China’s Foreign Aid

The statements on China’s aid policy regarding the mutual benefit principle have shifted over the years. During the early aid giving period, China’s aid policy statement gave full concern to the recipient’s needs and benefits, thus the importance of the mutual benefit principle can be questioned. During the opening-up and reform period, China’s stated its aid-giving needs to meet the interest of both sides, and mutual benefit came to a central place on China’s aid agenda. Following the turn of the new century, particularly after 2011, China’s aid policy statement again stresses more on recipient’s interest and the importance of emphasizing mutual benefit declines. This is, however, not the full picture of China’s foreign aid policy. Since emphasizing mutual benefit, there has always been a self-interest consideration in China’s foreign aid policy.

5.1. A Soft Tone for Pursuing Political Interests

Although not clearly interpreted in its policy statement, foreign aid has always been an integral part of China’s foreign policy, serving the country’s political interest. During Mao Zedong’s period, foreign aid played an important political role. Led by the Communist Party, the new government (People’s Republic of China, PRC) felt the need to develop its own foreign relations instead of adopting the diplomatic ties that were established by the Guomindang (Republic of China). Therefore, foreign aid was an essential

foreign instrument for developing foreign relations for the new government to acquire diplomatic recognition (Fuchs and Rudyak, 2019). This consideration has clearly been seen in the formulation of the One China policy, which expresses the PRC's ambition to replace Taiwan as the only legitimate representative of China in the United Nations. To gain more international support, China adjusted its aid policy by rapidly expanding foreign aid to Asia, Africa and Latin America between 1969 and 1974, which peaked in 1971 and 1973 (Chen, S., 2017: 127). In 1971, the PRC had enough support in the General Assembly of the United Nations (UN) to become the only legitimate member on behalf of China and it took over the permanent seat on the UN Security Council that had been held by the Republic of China (Taiwan). Among the 23 countries that sent the proposal for this change to the UN, 22 had received Chinese foreign aid in that period (Zhou, H., 2015: 215). Thereafter, China continues to use aid as an essential tool to isolate Taiwan from the international community. By the end of the 1970s, more than a hundred nations had established diplomatic relations with China.

In addition, China's aid policy also has another political concern – spreading its socialist power and influence. Although a newly founded country, Mao Zedong defined China as a major socialist power and in some ways an equal to the Soviet Union in Communist bloc affairs (Chen, S., 2017: 70; Copper, 1976: 19). Foreign aid was used by the Chinese government to help people in the oppressed countries to fight for their liberation. After China's victory in the revolution, Mao Zedong stated that,

China will make every possible effort to assist nation and people in the oppressed Asian, African and Latin American countries in fighting for their independence and liberation.... China will further be involved in fostering brotherhood relations and cooperation with socialist countries and at the same time strengthen cooperation with other peace-loving countries (Mao, 1999: 115–116).

After the Bandung Conference, the Chinese government decided to expand the scale of aid from the socialist camp to non-socialist countries by providing goods and materials for producing and living, and even military aid to assist the battle for national independence in Asia and Africa (Chen, S., 2017: 62). Sino-Soviet competition, particularly within the Communist movement, was seen not only in Asia but also spreading to African countries, such as Mali, Guinea and Tanzania (Copper, 1976: 85–114; Scalapino, 1964). Regarding China's aid provision, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai further explained, "in fact, this was not merely a case of China giving aid to Asian and African countries; China gave aid to newly-independent countries to unite their powers, in turn weakening the force of imperialism, which was also of enormous aid to China" (Zhou, E., 1964; cited in Zhou, H. and Xiong, 2017: 2–3). China could benefit

considerably in politics through generously giving aid to other developing countries (Chen, S., 2017: 68). Foreign aid has been used as an important diplomatic instrument to accomplish China's political goals.

After the reform and opening-up policy in 1978 and the start of the second period in aid policy, economic interests quickly overtook political ones and became the main consideration of China's aid policy. From 2010 onwards, however, political concerns are back. In contrast to the first period, China's current political interests are not short-term and ideological ones (such as diplomatic recognition and spreading socialist ideology in the first period) but focus instead on a long-term and global view consideration – improving China's international image as a responsible power, and increasing China's voice and influence in global governance. In China, the term “being a responsible great power” is often mentioned in connection with foreign aid. As Luo writes, “foreign aid represents China's contribution to international society, shows ‘big power responsibility’ and helps to win the approval of international society for China's rise” (Luo, 2016; cited in Fuchs and Rudyak, 2019). Foreign aid has been used as a form of soft power to create a positive international image. For example, regular visits by leaders and China's foreign minister, the establishment of the Confucius Institute overseas, and providing scholarships and training programs for international students in China help to improve communication and exchanges of culture, language and people (Tremann, 2018). China's growing engagement in humanitarian assistance also reflects this approach to projecting an exemplary international image (He, 2014; He and Cao, 2013). In a recently published aid document in January 2021, China again introduces foreign aid as its duty to actively engage in development as a responsible member of the international community (The State Council, 2021).

The Chinese government also uses foreign aid as a lever to gain a stronger voice in global governance. Compared to providing aid mainly through bilateral channels, China is demonstrating a willingness to pilot multilateral aid and cooperation. The BRI that was proposed by Chairman Xi Jinping in 2013 is considered China's biggest initiative to explore multilateral aid cooperation since the reform and opening-up policy (Wang, L. and Li, 2018: 76). At the First Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in Beijing in 2017, Xi Jinping expressed China's willingness to enhance multilateral cooperation and readiness to work with international organizations (XNA, 2017). Meanwhile, Xi Jinping also aims to contribute a new vision and norms to international relations and cooperation. Building a “community of common destiny” has become a main diplomatic thought for Xi Jinping's government (Zhang, D., 2018). This concept holds that humankind has become a community of common destiny, in that one country

is inseparable from another, with their interests being highly intermingled and interdependent (Xi, 2017b). Consequently, China's foreign aid has increasingly turned to focus on issues of shared interest, such as global health cooperation, climate change and humanitarian assistance (Su and Li, 2019).

5.2. Legitimizing the Goal of Pursuing Economic Interests

After the Reform and Opening Policy, economic interest is given great importance in China's foreign aid policy. With China's aid already having contributed to the political and diplomatic recognition, its foreign aid after 1978 is seen primarily as economic cooperation with other developing countries and as an integral part of the country's overall economic development strategy. Therefore, foreign aid played an important role in directly benefiting China's economic development agenda and interests (Fuchs and Rudyak, 2019). In the early 1990s, at the Working Meeting on China's Foreign Economic Relations and Trade, Minister Li Lanqing further strengthened this view by proposing that China should focus not only on aid but also on developing economic cooperation and trade relations with other developing countries. He further pointed out that the main task of Chinese aid was to encourage Chinese businesses to go abroad and cooperate with local businesses, which would ultimately promote the economic development of both China and the recipients (Song, 2019). To better encourage Chinese enterprises to "go abroad", China's Exim Bank was founded and it introduced a new lending strategy via the provision of medium and long-term concessional loans to recipients. The new lending arrangements would strengthen financial support for Chinese businesses to help them gain a competitive advantage overseas (Song, 2019). In this regard, China's state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and even private companies were encouraged to make an initial move to seek opportunities in other developing countries (Sato et al., 2011).

Besides, foreign aid is also incorporated into China's Grand Strategy of Economy and Trade, which uses aid to promote China's trade and investment interests. In 1992, China piloted foreign aid joint ventures that combined aid with trade and investment. In the mid-1990s, it formally introduced them as a model of economic cooperation, together with the above-mentioned concessional loan arrangements (Fuchs and Rudyak, 2019). The Chinese government integrated its aid agencies and commercial entities and encouraged them to work closely together, combining aid, direct investment, service contracts, labour cooperation, foreign trade and exports (Sun, 2014). In general, China's aid is always delivered as a part of a larger package, which often included a high-level visit, concessional loans, written-off loans

and promises to facilitate trade (Percival, 2007: 105–106). Thus, bilateral relations – particularly economic and trade relations between China and its aid recipients – underwent rapid development.

While the Chinese government is increasingly using aid to serve diplomatic and political purposes in the new century, economic interest remains an impetus. This is in particular obvious since the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013. But rather than simply increasing exports of Chinese products and labour or encouraging Chinese enterprises to go out in the past, through the BRI, China seeks to transform its aid and development strategy in accordance with long term economic considerations – to strengthen China’s influence over the rules and standards in overseas infrastructure engagement (Song, 2019; Sun, 2017). For instance, the Mombasa–Nairobi railway was built with Chinese standards, which means the whole line was designed with Chinese speed criteria, and the equipment and technology were provided by China. China also provided training for the service and operation of the railway project. For convenient connections, future railway lines connecting to this railway will adopt the same technology and services, and train carriages and related equipment will also conform to Chinese standards. The Jakarta–Bandung high-speed railway provides another example of China seeking to export its standards, equipment and technology. The project was China’s first overseas high-speed railway construction contract, promoting its export to Indonesia of not only Chinese equipment and products, but also the entire production chain of the Chinese high-speed railway industry.

5.3. A Rhetoric to Alleviate the Domestic Critics

It is also important to add that claiming mutual benefit can be seen as an expedient measure for China’s domestic governance. Put differently, the contemporary reality and social public opinion environment do not allow the Chinese government to abandon this principle. Although China became the second-largest economy in the world in 2010 with annual GDP growth of around 7%, its per capita GDP fell further behind, ranking 54 in 2020. While the Chinese government announced that China has completely eradicated extreme poverty, claiming to have met its poverty alleviation target under the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development 10 years ahead of schedule (NCR, 2021), the country still faces significant challenges such as increasing income inequality, urban-rural disparity, unemployment and ageing issues (Sonali Jain et al., 2018). Therefore, adhering to the policy of mutual benefit could alleviate domestic criticism and opposition to the government: China still has a lot of poverty inside so why does it provide aid to other countries, some of whom are richer than China itself (Lancaster, 2009)? Massive

criticisms typically appear on social media and from intellectuals whenever China releases the amount and details of foreign aid given to others. Foreign aid has been labelled as a sensitive issue for a long time, and the amount of aid was kept secret by the Chinese government. Thus, stressing the principle of mutual benefit could be an implicit way to explain why the Chinese government gives aid to other developing countries and to avoid further criticisms.

6. Conclusion

Explicitly stating that it is pursuing mutual benefit when giving aid is the quintessential characteristic of China's aid policy. Central documents on aid from all three periods incorporate the concept of mutual benefit and state it as a basic principle of China's foreign aid. While repeatedly present in official aid documents and publicity, the term "mutual benefit" can be somewhat difficult to understand due to the complex and changing aid policies and practices in China. It first needs to be understood from a policy dynamic perspective showing that the interpretation of mutual benefit has seen continuous changes.

Mutual benefit was put forward as a basic principle during Mao Zedong's period. The first of the Eight Principles in this period explicitly referred to mutual benefit. However, with basically all other principles stressing not mutual but beneficiary benefits, the importance of this principle can be questioned. This changed significantly after the Reform and Opening policy in 1978 when the mutual benefit statement moved to the centre of China's aid agenda. Following the turn of the century, particularly after 2011, China's aid policy statement experienced yet another adjustment. Although mutual benefit was still part of this period's principles, its importance dwindled again. Prioritizing the recipient's interest again became a more important guideline in China's foreign aid policy. In effect, this policy analysis shows that the foundation of China's aid policy has frequently shifted. Consequently, it is too simplistic to argue that China's aid is recipient-centred, focused on mutual benefit, or only pursuing self-interest. In reality, that foundation has always been mixed and that also means that there has always been an element of self-interest.

That mutual benefit has been used flexibly is an important reason for its durability as a principle in China's aid policy. Besides, as already stated, there has always been an element of self-interest in China's foreign aid giving. For example, during the early period of aid giving, China's aid was primarily focused on political interests. Chief among these was the goal of developing foreign relations and the "one-China policy." In the reform and opening-up

period, foreign aid played a vital role in advancing China's economic interests by, for example, encouraging Chinese businesses to "go out" and promote trade and investment relations with other countries. In the new century, particularly under Xi Jinping administration, economic interest remains an impetus, but foreign aid in China has been lifted to a more strategic and global view consideration – to project a good international image and seek more influence in global governance and affairs. Moreover, stressing the principle of mutual benefit could be an implicit way to avoid domestic criticism of the Chinese government. Mutual benefit, thus, is strategically used as rhetoric for justifying China's pursuing of these self-interests. Admittedly, it is not difficult to observe the "tool" nature of China's foreign aid, in the sense that foreign aid has always been a powerful diplomatic tool. China has strategically adjusted its interpretations of policy to satisfy its diplomatic objectives and serve the country's economic and political interests.

More recently, China seems to be softening its stance on its mutual benefit statement. In the latest official document, which was published by CIDCA in January 2021, mutual benefit is introduced as one of the distinctive approaches instead of the basic principle of China's foreign aid (The State Council, 2021). In the new document, the term "foreign aid" has been replaced by "development cooperation," and the remaining principles are strongly recipient-centred, such as "respecting each other as equal," "doing China's best to help," and "focusing on development and improving people's lives" (*ibid.*). Given that this document is brand new, it is too early to say whether it indicates the start of a new phase in China's aid. Also, although the policy discourse has seen changes, the mutual benefit concern will continue surviving as long as China labels itself as one of the developing countries and within the framework of South-South Cooperation. Pressure and critics from the domestic society also require that the Chinese government does not abandon this mutual benefit concern. Mutual benefit will still have a practical implication on China's foreign aid, if not as a basic principle in the policy statements.

It is a pity that being one of the most prominent donors of the Global South and having been practising the principle for many decades, China yet does not have a clear conceptual framework for its mutual benefit principle. On the contrary, China's position on this principle is getting more ambiguous. On one hand, it softens the stance on mutual benefit in the aid policy, but on the other hand in practice, China does not and will not abandon this approach. If the ambiguity remains, it will create more criticism of China's aid strategic opacity and poor aid practices. Therefore, rather than adjusting the government's policy statement frequently, a clear vision and realistic conceptual framework for mutual benefit are needed for China.

Appendix 1

China's Eight Principles for Foreign Economic and Technical Assistance in 1964 (Eight Principles)

- 1) China always bases its provision of aid to other nations on the principle of equality and mutual benefit.
- 2) China strictly respects the sovereignty of the recipient countries, and never attaches any conditions or asks for any privileges.
- 3) China provides economic aid in the form of interest-free or low-interest loans and extends the time limit for the repayment when necessary to lighten the burden of recipient countries as much as possible.
- 4) China does not make the recipient countries dependent on China but helps them gradually achieve self-reliance and independent development.
- 5) China tries its best to help the recipient countries build projects which require less investment while yielding quicker results, so that the recipient government may increase its income and accumulate capital.
- 6) China provides the best-quality equipment and materials of its own manufacture at international market prices.
- 7) In providing technical assistance, the Chinese government will ensure that the personnel of the recipient country fully master the necessary techniques.
- 8) The experts dispatched by China to help in recipient countries will have the same standard of living as the experts of the local. The Chinese experts are not allowed to make any special demands or enjoy any special amenities.

中国对外经济技术援助八项原则（1964）

- 第一，中国政府一贯根据平等互利的原则对外提供援助，从来不把这种援助看作是单方面的赐予，而认为援助是相互的。
- 第二，中国政府在对外提供援助的时候，严格尊重受援国的主权，绝不附带任何条件，绝不要求任何特权。
- 第三，中国政府以无息或者低息贷款的方式提供经济援助，在需要的时候延长还款期限，以尽量减少受援国的负担。
- 第四，中国政府对外提供援助的目的，不是造成受援国对中国的依赖，而是帮助受援国逐步走上自力更生、经济上独立发展的道路。
- 第五，中国政府帮助受援国建设的项目，力求投资少，收效快，使受援国政府能够增加收入，积累资金。
- 第六，中国政府提供自己所能生产的、质量最好的设备和物资，并且根据国际市场的价格议价。如果中国政府所提供的设备和物资不合乎商定的规格和质量，中国政府保证退换。

第七， 中国政府对外提供任何一种技术援助的时候， 保证做到使受援国的人员充分掌握这种技术。

第八， 中国政府派到受援国帮助进行建设的专家， 同受援国自己的专家享受同样的物质待遇， 不容许有任何特殊要求和享受。

Appendix 2

Four Principles of Sino-African Economic and Technological Cooperation' in 1983 (Four Principles)

- 1) Follow the principle of unity, friendship, equality and mutual benefit. Respect each other's sovereignty, and do not interfere in each other's internal affairs. No political conditions are attached, and no privilege is required. Experts and technicians are sent by China, and no special treatment is required.
- 2) Care about the actual needs of both sides and within China's abilities. Exert both their strengths and potential, and strive to invest less, have short construction periods, quick results, and good economic results.
- 3) Provide aid in varied forms, including technical services, training techniques and technology exchange, contract projects, cooperative productions, and joint ventures, and so on. China is committed to the cooperative project and is responsible for guaranteeing quality, making small profits, and focusing on justice.
- 4) The purpose of this cooperation is to learn from each other's strengths, and help each other to enhance mutual self-reliance and to develop their respective national economies.

中非经济技术合作四项原则（1983）

第一， 遵循团结友好、平等互利的原则， 尊重对方的主权， 不干涉对方的内政， 不附带任何政治条件， 不要求任何特权。

第二， 从双方的实际需要和可能条件出发， 发挥各自的长处和潜力， 力求投资少， 工期短， 收效快， 能取得良好的经济效益。

第三， 方式可以多种多样， 因地制宜， 包括提供技术服务、培训技术和管理人员、进行科学技术交流、承建工程、合作生产、合资经营等等。中国方面对所承担的合作项目负责守约、保质、薄利、重义。中国方面派出的专家和技术人员， 不要求特殊待遇。

第四， 上述合作之目的在于取长补短， 互相帮助， 以利于增强双方自力更生能力和促进各自民族经济的发展。

Appendix 3

China's Foreign Aid White Paper (2011)

- 1) Unremittingly help recipient countries build up their self-development capacity. In providing foreign aid, China does its best to help recipient countries to foster local personnel and technical forces, build infrastructure, and develop and use domestic resources.
- 2) Impose no political conditions. China never uses foreign aid as a means to interfere in recipient countries' internal affairs or seek political privileges for itself.
- 3) Adhere to equality, mutual benefit, and common development. Foreign aid is mutual help between developing countries, focuses on practical effects, accommodates recipient countries' interests, and strives to promote friendly bilateral relations and mutual benefit through economic and technical cooperation with other developing countries.
- 4) Aid should remain realistic while striving for the best. China provides foreign aid within the reach of its abilities in accordance with its national conditions. Giving full play to its comparative advantages, China does its utmost to tailor its aid to the actual needs of recipient countries.
- 5) Keep pace with the times, and pay attention to reform and innovation. China adapts its foreign aid to the development of both domestic and international situations, pays attention to summarizing experiences, makes innovations in the field of foreign aid, and promptly adjusts and reforms the management mechanism, so as to constantly improve its foreign aid work.

中国对外援助政策（2011）

- 第一，坚持帮助受援国提高自主发展能力。实践证明，一国的发展主要依靠自身的力量。中国在提供对外援助时，尽力为受援国培养本土人才和技术力量，帮助受援国建设基础设施，开发利用本国资源，打好发展基础，逐步走上自力更生、独立发展的道路。
- 第二，坚持不附带任何政治条件。中国坚持和平共处五项原则，尊重各受援国自主选择发展道路和模式的权利，相信各国能够探索出适合本国国情的发展道路，绝不把提供援助作为干涉他国内政、谋求政治特权的手段。
- 第三，坚持平等互利、共同发展。中国坚持把对外援助视为发展中国家之间的相互帮助，注意实际效果，照顾对方利益，通过开展与其他发展中国家的经济技术合作，着力促进双边友好关系和互利共赢。

第四，坚持量力而行、尽力而为。在援助规模和方式上，中国从自身国情出发，依据国力提供力所能及的援助。注重充分发挥比较优势，最大限度地结合受援国的实际需要。

第五，坚持与时俱进、改革创新。中国对外援助顺应国内外形势发展变化，注重总结经验，创新对外援助方式，及时调整改革管理机制，不断提高对外援助工作水平。

Notes

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