

Harmony in the Soil: Rethinking Modernization in the China-Africa Dialogue

By Evaline Mukami



From July 17 to 24, 2025, fifty African professionals representing fifty African nations convened in the Yangling Demonstration Zone, and Xi'an City, Shaanxi Province, to participate in the Seminar on Chinese Modernization and African Development. The delegation comprised experts from academia, government, research institutions, media organizations, and a range of corporate sectors, including agriculture, infrastructure, and technology reflecting the continent's multifaceted approach to development. Hosted in China's first national-level agricultural high-tech demonstration zone (the Yangling Demonstration Zone), the seminar offered more than a technical exchange, it became a philosophical dialogue on the future of development, sovereignty, and cooperation. The week-long engagement highlighted the value of comparative development frameworks and reaffirmed the importance of strategic partnerships in advancing the evolving landscape of China-Africa cooperation.

Yangling, Shaanxi Province is no ordinary venue. It is the birthplace of Chinese agricultural civilization, where Houji, the earliest agricultural official, taught the cultivation of Five Grains over 4,000 years ago. Today, it stands as a symbol of China's agricultural renaissance, housing over 110 research institutions and serving as a Belt and Road Modern Agricultural International Cooperation Center. The location itself was a statement: modernization must be rooted in history, identity, and innovation.



The seminar opened with a keynote by Xue Bing, Special Envoy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the Horn of Africa Affairs. His address framed Chinese modernization as a peaceful, inclusive, and culturally grounded process. This framing challenged dominant narratives that equate modernization with Western liberalism. Instead, it offered a model anchored in multilateralism, state-led development, and strategic pragmatism.

His address traced the arc of China-Africa relations through four distinct stages. Beginning with the founding of the People's Republic of China and its historic struggle against imperialism and colonialism, he highlighted the construction of the Tazara Railway (1970-1975) as a symbol of early solidarity. The second stage, spanning 1978 to 2000, emphasized political cooperation prior to the formal establishment of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in October 2000. The third stage, marked by the 2012 FOCAC, deepened strategic ties including robust cooperation with Africa on peace and security issues, culminating in the fourth stage: the 18th anniversary of CPC-FOCAC in 2018 in which the clarion call was to advance people-centered cooperation. Mr. Xue underscored continuous key areas of collaboration: maternal and child health care, the Africa Digital Education Center, and peace and security through UN peacekeeping deployments. He called for the removal of unfair tariffs that hinder African economies and advocated for modernization rooted in national principles, mutual respect, and strategic independence. His vision included upgrading the quality of China-Africa products, investing in new energy and healthcare, optimizing traditional sectors, and mobilizing civil society. He emphasized true multilateralism, peaceful coexistence, non-interference, and reforming global

institutions like the IMF to alleviate debt pressures. The overarching message was clear: China-Africa cooperation must be principled, people-driven, and anchored in mutual understanding.

Throughout the week, delegates engaged with lectures and site-visits on agricultural science, food security, smart farming, and cross-border trade. Site visits to Yangling Smart Agriculture Park (Plant Factory and Smart control Centre), Yangling Seed Industry Innovation Centre, Yangling Kiwi-fruit International Innovation Park presented achievements in seed innovation, water-saving irrigation, and digital transformation. Yet the most compelling insights emerged from the reflections and discussions among African delegates, who consistently sought to contextualize China's experience within Africa's diverse realities. The question was not whether China's model should be replicated, but how it could be reinterpreted. Africa's modernization, many argued, must be distinctive and independent, shaped by its own historical trajectories, demographic dynamics, and governance philosophies. The seminar became a space for intellectual co-creation, where African voices articulated a knowledge of development rooted in dignity, agency, and strategic sovereignty.

In Xi'an, the ancient capital of the Tang Dynasty, the dialogue deepened. The ancient capital of the Tang Dynasty and a city steeped in imperial legacy offered participants a living view of China's modernization in practice. The field visits embodied China's soft power: a blend of technology, tradition, and training. At the Hongzhuan South Road Community in Yanta District, delegates witnessed grassroots governance in action, exploring how community activity centers and medical service hubs embody China's people-centered development ethos. This micro-level engagement was juxtaposed with macro-level infrastructure during the visit to China Railway 20th Bureau Group Co. Limited, where discussions on urban planning and public infrastructure unfolded across the company's exhibition hall and symposium spaces. The tour of Shaanxi Heavy-Duty Automobile Co., Ltd. showcased intelligent manufacturing and industrial upgrading, reinforcing the seminar's emphasis on technological integration and economic transformation. At LONGi Green Energy Technology Co.Ltd participants engaged with China's green energy strategies for sustainable urbanization, an area of growing relevance for African cities grappling with climate resilience and clean energy access. The cultural heritage visit to the Terracotta Army Museum served as a poignant reminder that modernization need not erase tradition; rather, it can harmonize with historical identity. Together, these

experiences in Xi'an illustrated the multidimensional nature of Chinese modernization, where governance, industry, sustainability, and cultural continuity converge and offered African delegates tangible insights into how such a model might be adapted to their own national contexts.

Key discussions on trade facilitation, WTO commitments, and zero-tariff treatment for African goods underscored China's evolving role as Africa's largest trading partner and a key player in global economic governance. Yet participants did not shy away from critique. They raised concerns about unfair tariffs, debt sustainability, and the need for reforms in global financial institutions. They called for deeper youth and civil society engagement, more inclusive policy frameworks, and a recalibration of cooperation that prioritizes mutual respect over asymmetry.

The closing ceremony was a culmination of this intellectual journey. African delegates emphasized a shared aspiration: not for aid, but for co-authorship in shaping the global development agenda. What emerged from Xi'an was not a blueprint, but a mirror. A mirror that allowed Africa to reflect on its path, not as a passive recipient of external models, but as a continent capable of crafting its own narrative. Modernization, in this context, is not a monologue, it is a conversation. It must be rooted in history, guided by philosophy, and driven by strategic vision. The lessons are clear. Development must be people-centered, ecologically conscious, and intellectually sovereign. Yangling and Xi'an was not just about technology, but a philosophy. And in that philosophy lies the promise of a future that is bold, inclusive, and beautifully unfinished.