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Sinicization Over Mimicry: China's Adapted Marxism as a Model for Africa's Quest for Indigenous Development

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Abstract: This study examines China's Sinicised Marxism ("Socialism with Chinese Characteristics") as an alternative development model for Africa, challenging the premise that African nations must choose between Western liberal democracy and rigid ideological mimicry. It investigates how philosophical resonances between Marxist thought and indigenous African worldviews, particularly Ubuntu philosophy, create conditions for what this paper terms "adapted resonance," the selective indigenisation of foreign ideas rather than wholesale adoption. Drawing on policy translation theory, which conceptualises policy movement as a process of continuous translation rather than straightforward transfer, the study employs a qualitative multi-method design, including philosophical concept analysis, comparative case studies of Tanzania's Ujamaa and Ethiopia's developmental state, and critical discourse analysis of China-Africa policy documents. The study reveals three interconnected patterns. First, the Sinicisation of Marxism succeeded through philosophical synthesis with Confucian traditions of people-centred governance and collective wellbeing. Second, Ubuntu's emphasis on communal interdependence exhibits structural resonance with Sinicised Marxist principles, suggesting scope for analogous adaptation. Third, evidence from Ujamaa shows how ostensibly Marxist policies were localised through indigenous frameworks, exposing both possibilities and tensions in the indigenisation of foreign ideology. The study contributes to decolonial development scholarship by theorising "adapted resonance" as an alternative to diffusionist frameworks and by demonstrating that policy translation offers a more analytically rigorous approach to understanding South-South knowledge exchange than binary narratives of adoption or rejection. The paper offers policymakers analytical resources to distinguish productive adaptation from new forms of intellectual dependency in Africa's engagement with China's development experience.

Keywords: sinicisation of marxism; ubuntu philosophy; indigenous development; adapted resonance; decolonial theory; ujamaa socialism

1. Introduction

The contemporary development landscape presents African nations with a profound dilemma. For decades, the dominant paradigm of Western liberal democracy and neoliberal economics has been positioned as the singular path to modernisation, a presumption recently deconstructed as historically contingent and epistemically violent [1]. The rise of China as a global power offers not liberation from mimicry but the danger of its replication: substituting one external model for another, leaving African nations as consumers rather than producers of development knowledge [2,3].

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Yet within this dilemma lies an opportunity. China's developmental trajectory demonstrates something more valuable than a model to be copied: the process of indigenising foreign ideology. The Sinicisation of Marxism, which this paper defines as the selective appropriation and transformation of Marxist theory through engagement with Chinese philosophical traditions, particularly Confucianism, offers a distinctive case of ideological indigenisation that has been insufficiently theorised in development studies. This process was neither straightforward nor linear. As the paper later elaborates, the relationship between Marxism and Confucianism in China has been historically contingent, involving periods of active opposition followed by strategic synthesis [4,5].

Nevertheless, China's experience is relevant as a historically contested process of ideological adaptation. As earlier posited, Sinicisation encompasses successive reinterpretations of Marxism in relation to revolutionary strategy, socialist construction, reform and contemporary governance; it is not interchangeable with either Confucianism or a single unchanging development model [6,7]. The official expression 'Socialism with Chinese Characteristics' is used throughout this article. Mao Zedong's localisation of revolutionary practice must be distinguished from the later official revaluation of selected elements of traditional Chinese culture. However, the argument does not assume that Chinese growth resulted from philosophical synthesis alone.

In a speech delivered on 11 January 2022 and published in Qiushi in June 2022, Xi Jinping described the continuing theoretical task as follows:

> "*Contemporary China is undergoing the most magnificent and unique practical innovation in human history. The tasks of reform, development, and stability are unprecedentedly heavy, the contradictions, risks, and challenges are unprecedentedly numerous, and the tests of governance are unprecedentedly great. The profound changes in the world are also unprecedented, raising a large number of theoretical and practical questions that urgently need to be answered. The task of advancing the Sinicization and modernization of Marxism has not become lighter, but rather heavier*"—Section on adapting Marxism to the Chinese context and the needs of the times [8].

Understanding this complexity is essential for drawing accurate lessons for Africa, as it reveals that indigenisation is a contested, politically mediated process rather than a technical exercise in cultural matching.

This paper makes three principal contributions to scholarship on South-South development cooperation and decolonial theory. First, it develops the concept of "adapted resonance" as an analytical alternative to diffusionist models of policy transfer, arguing that successful ideological exchange requires structural compatibility between source and recipient philosophical frameworks rather than substantive identity. Second, it demonstrates that policy translation theory [9–12] provides a more analytically rigorous approach to understanding China-Africa knowledge exchange than binary narratives of adoption or rejection. Third, it offers a historically grounded comparative analysis of Tanzania's Ujamaa and Ethiopia's developmental state that illuminates both the possibilities and limitations of indigenising external development models.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 develops the theoretical framework, integrating decolonial theory, constructivist norm localisation, policy translation, and Ubuntu philosophy. Section 3 reviews the relevant literature on Sinicised Marxism, African indigenous thought, China-Africa relations, and the two case studies. Section 4 outlines the methodology. Section 5 presents the findings, including the philosophical analysis of resonances and the comparative case analysis. Section 6 discusses theoretical and practical implications. Section 7 concludes by reflecting on the significance of adapted resonance for Africa's quest for indigenous development.

2. Theoretical Framework

This section outlines four intersecting theoretical traditions that underpin the study: decolonial theory, constructivist norm localisation, policy translation theory, and Ubuntu philosophy. Collectively, these frameworks provide the analytical tools necessary to examine ideological exchange without reproducing the epistemic hierarchies that have historically characterised North-South knowledge relations. The inclusion of policy translation theory is particularly significant as it offers a well-developed conceptual vocabulary for analysing the movement of policies and ideas across contexts, their transformation through interpretation and adaptation, and the power relations that shape these processes, which this paper investigates [9–12]. The section first discusses decolonial theory and its implications for epistemic justice in China-Africa relations, followed by an examination of constructivist approaches to norm diffusion and localisation. It then introduces policy translation theory and its relevance to South-South knowledge exchange. Subsequently, it turns to Ubuntu as an indigenous philosophical resource for rethinking development. Finally, the section synthesises these traditions into the paper's core analytical concept of "adapted resonance."

2.1. Decolonial Theory and Epistemic Justice

Decolonial theory diagnoses the persistent hierarchy that positions European thought as universal and African indigenous knowledge as backward or pre-scientific [1,12]. The dominance of Western thought is also acknowledged in other parts of the world. For example, refs. [13,14] developed their frameworks primarily through analysis of Latin American colonial experiences. Their work on the "coloniality of power" and "decolonial delinking" emerged from Latin American historical contexts, particularly the Spanish and Portuguese colonial empires. Extending these concepts to Africa was not automatic; it required deliberate intellectual labour. As [1,12] has argued, African scholars have had to demonstrate that the colonial matrix of power operates through distinct but related mechanisms on the African continent, including the specific legacies of British, French, Portuguese, and Belgian colonialism, as well as the unique manifestations of apartheid and settler colonialism in southern Africa. Ndlovu-Gatsheni's concept of "epistemic freedom" [1] builds on but also departs from Latin American decolonial thought by centring African intellectual traditions and struggles for liberation.

Within African decolonial scholarship, significant debates have emerged about the appropriate relationship between indigenous knowledge systems and external intellectual traditions. Ndlovu-Gatsheni [1,12,15] has been a leading proponent of epistemic delinking, arguing that African development thinking remains trapped within colonial matrices of power that marginalise indigenous epistemic traditions. His work calls for a fundamental reorientation of African knowledge production away from Eurocentric frameworks. However, this position has been contested by scholars such as [16], who argues that the decolonial turn risks descending into a form of nativism that romanticises pre-colonial African knowledge and rejects potentially valuable external ideas simply because of their origins. Taiwo contends that what matters is not the geographical origin of ideas but their capacity to serve human flourishing, and that African societies have historically demonstrated remarkable capacity for selective appropriation and synthesis. This paper positions itself within this debate by arguing that epistemic sovereignty does not require wholesale rejection of external ideas but rather their critical appropriation through indigenous frameworks, a position that seeks to navigate between uncritical mimicry and reflexive nativism. The concept of adapted resonance developed here is intended to provide analytical resources for this middle path.

Applying this to China-Africa relations, it is recognised that South-South cooperation can reproduce epistemic hierarchies even as it challenges North-South asymmetries [2,3]. The danger is exchanging the Washington Consensus for the Beijing Consensus without achieving genuine intellectual sovereignty [16]. The goal, therefore, is not faithful replication of any external model but creating conditions for African societies to generate development knowledge from their own philosophical foundations [17].

2.2. Constructivist Norm Localisation

Constructivist international relations offers tools for understanding how norms diffuse not unidirectionally but through localisation, translation, and adaptation [18,19]. Acharya's norm localisation describes how global norms are reconfigured through congruence building with local beliefs. This framework recognises agency among norm takers. Acharya's concept of "congruence building" is particularly relevant to this study, as it describes how local actors actively reconstruct external norms to fit their existing institutional and cultural frameworks rather than simply accepting or rejecting them. This process involves what Acharya calls "localisation"—the active construction of foreign ideas by local actors, which results in their normative and institutional adaptation. Recent scholarship extends this to South-South ideological exchange [20,21]. Ref. [22], studying Tanzania's Ujamaa policy, show that state-building experiments grounded in local philosophical traditions produce lasting effects on national identity and state legitimacy, suggesting that ideological adaptation succeeds not through fidelity to external sources but through resonance with indigenous conceptual frameworks.

2.3. Policy Translation Theory

While constructivist norm localisation provides valuable insights into how norms are adapted, policy translation theory offers a more developed conceptual apparatus for analysing the specific mechanisms of policy movement across contexts [9–12,23]. Policy translation theory challenges the assumption that policies can simply be transferred from one context to another, arguing instead that policy movement is always a process of translation involving interpretation, adaptation, and transformation.

Ref. [9] argue that policies should be understood not as fixed entities that move across space but as "assemblages" that are constantly being made and remade through their encounters with different contexts. Ref. [10] extend this analysis by emphasising the role of "translation" in policy movement, drawing on the work of actor-network theory and cultural sociology to argue that translation involves both the movement of ideas and their

transformation through encounter with new actors and contexts. The key insight is that policies are never simply "transferred" from one place to another; they are always reinterpreted and reassembled in the process.

In sum, the significance of policy translation theory for this study lies in three key insights. First, it provides a conceptual vocabulary for understanding what the paper terms "adapted resonance." This is the process through which external ideas are selected, reinterpreted, and transformed through alignment with indigenous philosophical frameworks. Policy translation theory insists that this is not a technical exercise in matching but a deeply political process involving power relations and struggles over meaning. Second, it recognises that translation is not a one-way process. As [11] argues, translation involves the simultaneous transformation of both the "source" and "recipient" contexts; the act of translation changes both the translated text and the target language. Applied to China-Africa relations, this means that African engagement with Chinese development experience should not be understood as simply "receiving" Chinese ideas but as actively reconstructing them in ways that may also transform Chinese thinking about development. Third, policy translation theory emphasises the importance of "scales" and "places" in policy movement [23]. This highlights that policies move not only between countries but between different scales (global, regional, national, local) and are shaped by the specific places in which they are received.

2.4. Ubuntu as a Philosophical Framework

The fourth pillar draws on African philosophical scholarship on Ubuntu as an indigenous resource for conceptualising development, community, and human flourishing [24,25]. Ubuntu is a complex and contested concept that has been variously defined in literature. For the purposes of this study, Ubuntu is understood as a moral philosophy and relational ontology that affirms the fundamental interconnectedness of human beings, encapsulated in the maxim *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (a person is a person through persons). This definition should be understood as a working definition rather than a definitive statement, as Ubuntu philosophy resists reduction to a single formulation and has been interpreted in diverse ways across different contexts and scholarly traditions.

It is important to acknowledge that claims to Ubuntu as a variant of indigenous African philosophy are linked historically to South Africa and Zimbabwe, particularly to the Nguni and Shona linguistic communities [25]. Recent research moves beyond treating Ubuntu as a mere moral philosophy to position it as a coherent paradigmatic framework integrating ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology [26,27]. Ref. [26] demonstrate through community-based research in South Africa's Vhembe District that Ubuntu provides ethical guidance and practical frameworks for collective action, mutual support, and conflict resolution. Importantly, scholars explore Ubuntu as a decolonial research paradigm capable of challenging colonial legacies [28,29], not as a nostalgic tradition but as a living philosophical resource for engaging external development ideas from a position of epistemic strength.

However, the question of how broadly Ubuntu can be applied across the African continent requires careful consideration. The premise of this paper is not that Ubuntu is universally shared in identical form across all African societies, but rather that it exemplifies a broadly relational ontology that has analogues and resonances in many African philosophical traditions. As the paper argues, the process of adapted resonance requires that abstract philosophical principles be translated into specific institutional and cultural contexts. This implies that any application of Ubuntu to African development must itself be subjected to the same process of translation it seeks to describe—that is, it must be adapted to the specific conditions of different African societies rather than treated as a universal template.

2.5. Adapted Resonance

Synthesising these traditions, the paper develops "adapted resonance" as an analytical framework for South-South ideological exchange. The framework posits that successful knowledge transfer requires not similarity between source and recipient contexts (which is impossible) but structural compatibility that permits creative synthesis. The framework draws on (1) decolonial theory's emphasis on epistemic sovereignty; (2) constructivist norm localisation's mechanisms of reconfiguration; (3) policy translation theory's insistence on the transformative nature of policy movement; and (4) Ubuntu's indigenous conceptual resources.

As the pioneer of China's reform and opening up, Deng Xiaoping wisely cautions:

> "*The topic of building socialism in China cannot be found in Marx's or Lenin's books. Every country has its own circumstances and different experiences, so independent thinking is necessary.*" [30].

This insistence on independent thinking, forging one's own path rather than consulting a pre-existing manual, lies at the heart of adapted resonance. It rejects the notion that development models can be extracted from texts and transplanted across contexts, affirming that each society must discover its own synthesis and practical approach.

Among other strides, the paper specifies the criteria that constitute "structural factors" enabling compatibility. Building on the preceding theoretical discussion, structural factors are defined as fundamental ontological and axiological commitments that shape how a society understands personhood, social relationships, and the good life. These include: (1) ontological orientation (whether reality is understood as primarily relational or individualistic); (2) ethical orientation (whether ethical value is located in individual achievement or collective wellbeing); (3) political orientation (whether legitimate governance is understood as serving individual rights or collective interests); and (4) epistemological orientation (whether knowledge is understood as produced through individual reason or collective deliberation). For a summary of the proposed criteria for evaluating adapted resonance as discussed in this study, see the table below (Table 1).

Table 1. Proposed criteria for evaluating adapted resonance.

Criterion	Analytical Question	Evidence to Seek	Contradiction to Investigate
Locally authorised purpose	Who defines the problem and can contest it?	Documented consultation and reasons for accepting or rejecting objections.	Elite endorsement presented as a unified communal preference.
Institutional mediation	Which rules and capabilities enact the purpose?	Decision rights, implementation mandates, independent appeal and remedies.	Consultative language alongside compulsory relocation or exclusion.
Material feasibility	Can the arrangement sustain production and finance?	Skills, supplier capability, fiscal and foreign-exchange exposure, ownership.	An ethical justification substitutes for a financing or capability assessment.
Distributive accountability	Who gains, who bears costs and who can seek correction?	Benefits and burdens by affected group; enforceable review provisions.	Aggregate achievement conceals uncompensated or unreviewable harms.

These structural factors are significant for determining resonance because they shape the fundamental assumptions that underlie policies and institutional arrangements. A policy developed in a context with individualistic ontological and ethical commitments may not translate successfully into a context with relational commitments, not because the policy is technically flawed but because it conflicts with fundamental cultural assumptions about how society should be organised.

The question of why resonance is a precondition for successful adaptation is critical. The paper argues that resonance is necessary because policies are not merely technical instruments but are embedded in cultural meanings and philosophical assumptions. When a policy is transplanted into a context where its underlying assumptions are not shared, it is likely to encounter resistance to be implemented in ways that undermine its stated objectives, or to be rejected altogether. By contrast, when there is structural resonance between the source and recipient contexts, the policy can be reinterpreted in light of shared commitments, making it more likely to be implemented in ways that serve indigenous purposes. This does not mean that adaptation is not necessary—even with resonance, adaptation is required to fit specific circumstances. But resonance provides the foundational compatibility that makes adaptation possible.

In short, productive engagement requires, therefore: (1) critical diagnosis of epistemic assumptions; (2) identification of structural resonances with indigenous frameworks; (3) creative synthesis that subordinates external ideas to indigenous priorities; and (4) empirical validation through institutional practice.

2.6. Operationalising Adapted Resonance: From Theory to Analysis

Having specified the theoretical foundations and structural criteria for adapted resonance, this section outlines how the framework is operationalised in the empirical analysis that follows. The framework's analytical value depends on its capacity to generate tractable research questions and observable indicators. Accordingly, the paper translates the four structural factors identified above (ontological, ethical, political, and epistemological orientations) into specific analytical categories that can be examined in both the Chinese and African contexts.

First, regarding ontological orientation, the analysis examines how each tradition conceptualises the relationship between individual and community. This involves identifying whether personhood is understood as prior to or constituted through social relationships, and how this understanding shapes approaches to development. In the Chinese context, the paper traces how Confucian relational ontology was synthesised with Marxist materialism to produce a distinctive conception of the socially embedded person [31,32]. In the African context, the analysis examines how Ubuntu's *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* articulates a similar relational ontology [25,33].

Second, concerning ethical orientation, the analysis investigates how each tradition locates ethical value. This involves examining whether moral worth is understood primarily in terms of individual achievement and rights or

collective wellbeing and social harmony. The Chinese synthesis of Marxist human emancipation with Confucian benevolence provides a case of ethical convergence around collective flourishing [6,7]. Similarly, Ubuntu ethics prioritises communal responsibility and mutual care over individual accumulation [26,34].

Third, with respect to political orientation, the analysis examines how each tradition conceptualises legitimate governance. This involves identifying whether political legitimacy is grounded in individual consent and procedural democracy or in the state's capacity to serve collective interests and promote social harmony. The Sinicised Marxist conception of people-centred governance represents a distinctive synthesis of Marxist and Confucian political thought [5]. Ubuntu-based governance traditions emphasise consensus, consultation, and restorative justice, offering an alternative to both liberal and Leninist models [24,29].

Fourth, regarding epistemological orientation, the analysis examines how each tradition understands the production and validation of knowledge. This involves identifying whether knowledge is understood as produced through individual rational inquiry or collective deliberation and practical engagement. The Marxist emphasis on praxis as the criterion of truth resonates with Confucian emphasis on learning through practice and social interaction [4,35]. Ubuntu epistemology similarly prioritises collective wisdom and lived experience over abstract individual reasoning [27,28].

These analytical categories provide the basis for the comparative analysis in subsequent sections. They allow the paper to move beyond superficial assertions of resonance to examine specific mechanisms of philosophical compatibility and their implications for policy adaptation. Importantly, the framework does not assume that resonance in all four dimensions is necessary for successful adaptation. Rather, it posits that the configuration of resonances and dissonances shapes the possibilities and constraints of ideological exchange. As the paper later demonstrates, the Chinese case involved significant dissonance in political orientation (between Confucian hierarchical governance and Marxist egalitarianism) that was resolved through creative synthesis. The African cases examined later reveal different configurations of resonance and dissonance, with important implications for development outcomes.

Further, the framework acknowledges that structural factors do not operate in isolation from material conditions. An analysis of ideological exchange that neglects historical and material factors risks abstraction and idealism. Accordingly, the paper integrates attention to political economy throughout the analysis, examining how class dynamics, geopolitical positioning, and resource flows interact with philosophical frameworks. The concept of adapted resonance is not intended to displace materialist analysis but to supplement it with attention to the cultural and philosophical dimensions that shape how material forces are understood and navigated. This dual focus responds to calls for a more nuanced approach to South-South relations that avoids both economic determinism and cultural idealism [36–38].

2.7. Policy Translation as Analytical Framework

The preceding discussion of adapted resonance has emphasised the structural compatibility between philosophical traditions. However, structural resonance is a necessary but insufficient condition for successful adaptation. The process through which resonance is translated into institutional practice requires careful attention to the mechanisms of policy movement. This is where policy translation theory provides essential analytical resources.

Policy translation theory, as developed by [9–12], offers a sophisticated account of how policies move across contexts. The theory's central insight is that policy movement is not a simple process of transfer but a complex process of translation involving interpretation, adaptation, and transformation. As [9] argue, policies are not fixed entities that can be transplanted intact from one context to another; they are "assemblages" that are constantly being made and remade through their encounters with different contexts.

This perspective has several implications for the analysis of adapted resonance. First, it suggests that the process of adaptation is not merely a matter of identifying structural resonances and then applying them. Rather, adaptation is an ongoing process of translation in which the meanings and practices associated with external ideas are continually reinterpreted in light of local contexts. Second, policy translation theory emphasises that translation is a political process involving power relations and struggles over meaning [10,23]. The question of which ideas get translated, by whom, and in whose interests is not neutral but shaped by asymmetries of power. Third, policy translation theory draws attention to the material and institutional dimensions of policy movement [11]. Policies are not just ideas but also practices, technologies, and institutional arrangements that must be adapted to local conditions.

The integration of policy translation theory with the adapted resonance framework enables a more nuanced analysis of the Chinese and African cases. In the Chinese case, the Sinicisation of Marxism can be understood as a process of translation in which Marxist concepts were interpreted through Confucian categories, and Confucian traditions were reinterpreted in light of Marxist commitments. This was not a simple synthesis but a contested and

politically mediated process involving struggles over the meaning of both Marxism and Confucianism [4,5]. In the African cases, the analysis examines how external development models were translated through indigenous frameworks, and how these translations shaped development outcomes.

The emphasis on translation also has implications for how we understand the relationship between China and Africa. Rather than viewing Africa as a passive recipient of Chinese ideas, the policy translation perspective positions African actors as active translators who interpret and adapt Chinese experience in light of their own contexts and priorities. This aligns with recent scholarship on African agency in China-Africa relations [20,39] and with the broader decolonial commitment to epistemic sovereignty. At the same time, the policy translation perspective cautions against romanticising African agency. Translation occurs within asymmetric power relations, and the terms of translation are not always set by African actors. The challenge is to create conditions in which African translation can proceed from a position of epistemic strength rather than dependency.

3. Literature Review

This section reviews key bodies of literature that inform the study's central argument. It begins by examining the Sinicisation of Marxism as a process of ideological indigenisation, followed by a discussion of African indigenous thought, particularly Ubuntu philosophy, as a resource for alternative development. The review then surveys the evolving landscape of China-Africa relations, analyses two prominent indigenous development models in Tanzania's Ujamaa and Ethiopia's developmental state, and concludes with an overview of South-South cooperation and knowledge transfer dynamics.

3.1. The Sinicisation of Marxism

The Sinicisation of Marxism (Socialism with Chinese Characteristics) represents a profound intellectual transformation: the appropriation and reconstitution of a European philosophical tradition through engagement with Chinese civilisation [6,7]. This characterisation is warranted not because the synthesis is unprecedented in scale, for other civilisational encounters with Marxism have also involved significant adaptation, but because of the depth and duration of the engagement spanning more than a century and involving the transformation of both Marxism and Chinese philosophical traditions in the process.

A particularly instructive articulation of the pragmatic spirit underpinning Sinicisation comes from Chairman Mao Zedong's 25 April 1956 speech 'On the ten major relationships,' saying:

> "*We must resolutely resist and criticize all corrupt systems and ideologies of the foreign bourgeoisie. However, this does not prevent us from learning the scientific aspects of advanced science and technology and business management methods from capitalist countries. Enterprises in industrialized countries employ fewer people, are highly efficient, and are adept at business; we should learn these principles thoroughly to improve our work.*" [40].

This dialectical posture, a firm rejection of ideological subordination combined with open willingness to extract usable techniques, distinguishes adapted resonance from both wholesale rejection and uncritical mimicry.

As [4] demonstrates, the Sinicisation process unfolded through distinct historical phases, each marked by different configurations of engagement between Marxist and Confucian thought. The early revolutionary period was characterised by sharp opposition to Confucianism as a feudal ideology incompatible with revolutionary socialism. However, as the Communist Party consolidated power and confronted the challenges of governance, a gradual reassessment occurred. The post-Mao reform era witnessed a deliberate revival of Confucian concepts, not as a replacement for Marxism but as a complementary resource for conceptualising social harmony, ethical governance, and collective wellbeing. This historical trajectory reveals that Sinicisation was not a singular event but an ongoing, contested process shaped by political exigencies and strategic calculations [5]. The complexity of this process has significant implications for Africa, as it suggests that ideological adaptation is never a straightforward philosophical exercise but is always entangled with questions of political power, institutional interests, and historical contingency.

The Sinicisation of Marxism thus understood represents an important case of what this paper terms "adapted resonance," not the simple imposition of foreign categories onto indigenous thought nor the wholesale rejection of external ideas, but a selective, politically mediated synthesis. This process has been analysed through various conceptual lenses, including the notion of "policy translation" developed by [9,10]. Seen through this lens, the Sinicisation of Marxism can be understood as a process of translation in which Marxist concepts were interpreted through Confucian categories, and Confucian traditions were reinterpreted in light of Marxist commitments. This was

not a simple synthesis but a contested and politically mediated process involving struggles over the meaning of both Marxism and Confucianism [4,5].

3.2. African Indigenous Thought and Development Alternatives

Ubuntu philosophy has generated extensive discussion on governance, economics, and social organisation [24,25,34]. Empirical research documents Ubuntu's continued vitality. Ref. [26] found that Ubuntu principles remain central to shaping social relationships, fostering resilience, and promoting communal harmony in Vhembe communities, as demonstrated through mutual support without monetary reward, community-based care, and intergenerational value transmission. Ref. [17] argues that indigenous knowledge systems address Africa's economic challenges that conventional frameworks miss. However, scholars caution against romanticisation. Ref. [29] calls for critical engagement, and [26] acknowledge challenges of institutional acceptance and methodological standardisation. The task is to draw on indigenous philosophical resources for contemporary challenges, including engagement with external development ideas.

As noted in the theoretical framework, the question of how broadly Ubuntu can be applied across the African continent requires careful consideration. The premise of this paper is not that Ubuntu is universally shared in identical form across all African societies, but rather that it exemplifies a broadly relational ontology that has analogues and resonances in many African philosophical traditions. This position navigates between the Scylla of uncritical universalism and the Charybdis of narrow particularism. As [25] argues, while the specific term "Ubuntu" is rooted in Nguni and Shona linguistic communities, the underlying philosophical commitments to relational personhood and communal wellbeing find expression across diverse African traditions. The concept of adapted resonance developed in this paper is intended to capture the dynamic that abstract philosophical principles must themselves be translated into specific institutional and cultural contexts. Any application of Ubuntu to African development must be subjected to the same process of translation it seeks to describe.

3.3. China-Africa Relations

The literature has moved beyond infrastructure and extraction to examine political, ideological, and epistemic dimensions [41,42]. Recent analyses highlight diversification such as zero-tariff policies, vocational training, industrial parks, and agricultural modernisation [43]. Geopolitically, ref. [21] positions China-Africa relations within Global South realignment, while [20] emphasise African agency as co-architects of strategies aligned with Africa's Agenda 2063. However, critical scholars identify tensions. According to [44,45], extractive practices, debt sustainability, and environmental impacts complicate narratives of mutual benefit. The gap between China's anti-imperialist rhetoric and actual practices has led some to argue that China reproduces rather than transforms extractive North-South relations [15,46].

A particularly important contribution to this critical literature comes from Patrick Bond, whose work on China-Africa relations and the concept of "sub-imperialism" offers a sophisticated analysis of the contradictory dynamics at play. Ref. [37] argues that China's engagement with Southern Africa cannot be understood simply through the lens of South-South solidarity or anti-imperialism, as the relationship is structured by extractive imperatives and unequal exchange that reproduce patterns of dependency. In his analysis of the costs and benefits of China's role in Southern Africa, Bond demonstrates that while Chinese investment has contributed to infrastructure development and economic growth, the terms of engagement often perpetuate structural asymmetries. More recently, ref. [36] has extended this analysis to critique the notion that partnerships between emerging powers and African states can transcend imperialist dynamics without fundamental transformation of the global political economy. Ref. [38] similarly cautions against what he terms the "travesty of anti-imperialism," arguing that appeals to anti-imperialist solidarity can obscure the reproduction of exploitative relations. These critical perspectives are essential for the analysis of adapted resonance developed in this paper, as they caution against a purely philosophical analysis that neglects the material and geopolitical dimensions of China-Africa relations. The concept of adapted resonance must therefore be understood not as a substitute for political economy analysis but as a supplement to it, attentive to how philosophical frameworks shape and are shaped by material interests, class dynamics, and geopolitical positioning.

3.4. Ujamaa and Developmental State as Indigenous Development Models

Tanzania's Ujamaa policy (1967–1985) remains the most sustained African effort to ground socialist development in indigenous values. Julius Nyerere's Ujamaa ("familyhood") drew on traditional communal values while engaging socialist thought [47,48]. However, the historical relationship between Tanzania's Ujamaa and China's Sinicisation of Marxism is more complex than a simple case of parallel adaptation. Tanzania pursued a

strategy of adapting and/or transforming Marxist-Leninist principles to its local cultural and cognitive conditions via Ujamaa in 1967, prior to China's post-Mao revival of Confucian traditions. Moreover, notions of self-reliance, rural villagisation, village health workers, and nationalisation in Tanzania all derive, to a degree, from Chinese policies associated with the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. These policies were adapted to local social, economic, cultural, and historical conditions via the indigenous idiom of Ujamaa. This historical complexity suggests that the relationship between China and Tanzania is not one of model and imitator but of overlapping and mutually constitutive experiments in ideological adaptation.

This historical observation has important implications for the argument advanced in this paper. Taking the argument for adapted resonance seriously, Tanzania's Ujamaa may represent an earlier model of adaptive resonance than China's post-Mao synthesis. However, the question of which case better exemplifies adapted resonance is distinct from the question of long-term success. Assessing success would require a broader evaluation of the endogenous and exogenous factors that informed development in both societies. The paper's purpose is not to adjudicate between these cases but to draw analytical lessons from both. Tanzania's Ujamaa demonstrates both the possibilities and the limitations of grounding socialist development in indigenous values, while China's Sinicisation demonstrates how a civilisational tradition can be mobilised as a resource for ideological adaptation. Both cases are instructive for African societies seeking to engage external ideas from a position of epistemic sovereignty.

Ref. [22] provide quantitative evidence of Ujamaa's lasting positive impacts on national identity and state legitimacy, driven by educational content. However, trade-offs include lower demands for democratic accountability and no increase in inter-ethnic trust. Coercive implementation (forced villagisation and suppression of dissent) contradicted communal values, undermining effectiveness [48,49]. As [50] argues, policies claiming indigenous values must embody them in implementation; top-down imposition violates Ubuntu's participatory ethos.

Similarly, Ethiopia's Developmental State (1991–present) offers a contemporary case of China-inspired modelling. The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) articulated "revolutionary democracy," drawing on Marxist-Leninist principles while adapting to Ethiopian conditions [51,52]. Achievements were substantial. The proportion of the population with access to electricity rose from approximately 20% in 2015 to 55% by 2022 [53]. Between 2005 and 2015, poverty incidence declined from 39% to 24% [53]. However, vulnerabilities still emerged. Ethiopia grappled with an overvalued currency, unsustainable debt, and insufficient productivity growth. By 2023, these pressures culminated in a sovereign debt default. The Tigray conflict, drought, and global shocks exacerbated the crisis. By 2024, Ethiopia embarked on a comprehensive macroeconomic reform supported by the IMF/World Bank, effectively diluting core developmental state elements. The case illuminates both the potential of state-led development and the dangers of models that prioritise rapid results over resilient institutions.

However. there is a commonality that needs to be acknowledged rather than juxtaposing Tanzania and Ethiopia as isolated case studies that have no prior influence, particularly with respect to policy. Both countries are allies of China and have received foreign development aid as part of their developmental trajectories. It should also be acknowledged that Tanzania and Ethiopia have both engaged with Chinese development experience in ways that shaped their policy choices, and that both have been subject to conditionalities from international financial institutions. The discussion of IMF/World Bank structural adjustment and debt conditionality relative to the Ethiopian case requires nuanced treatment. The critique that Ethiopia's debt crisis resulted from prioritising "rapid results" applies equally to Tanzania, which has also experienced similar forms of indebtedness and conditionality. Therefore, it is logical to acknowledge that both cases are embedded in broader dynamics of global financial governance and that the "lessons" from these cases are not simply about technical policy choices but about the structural constraints imposed by the international political economy.

3.5. South-South Cooperation and Knowledge Transfer

Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and the Convention on Biological Diversity initiatives demonstrate structured South-South knowledge sharing, emphasising demand-driven cooperation and local capacity building [54,55]. Scholars, such as [56], examine epistemic dimensions, analysing how knowledge transfer can either reproduce or challenge Northern epistemic dominance; Ref. [57] position South-South cooperation within struggles for global economic justice. South-South cooperation is not inherently transformative but contains potential for more equitable knowledge relations if consciously oriented toward that goal.

The literature on South-South cooperation has increasingly engaged with the concept of policy translation as a framework for understanding how policies and ideas move across contexts. Refs. [9,10] have developed policy translation theory as a challenge to conventional approaches to policy transfer, arguing that the movement of policies across contexts involves not simple transfer but complex processes of interpretation, adaptation, and transformation.

This perspective has been applied to South-South cooperation by scholars such as [56], who argues that knowledge exchange among Global South countries is shaped by power relations and epistemic hierarchies that require careful analysis. The policy translation framework offers analytical resources for understanding both the possibilities and the constraints of South-South knowledge exchange, and it provides the conceptual understanding for the analysis of adapted resonance developed in this paper.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative multi-method design grounded in interpretivist epistemology, a choice well suited to investigating philosophical meaning, ideological adaptation, and discursive construction. These are phenomena that resist quantification. The section is organised into six subsections. It first outlines the interpretivist research paradigm that underpins the study, followed by detailed descriptions of the three core analytical methods: philosophical concept analysis, comparative case study design, and critical discourse analysis. Subsequently, it explains the procedures for thematic data integration and concludes with a discussion of ethical considerations and researcher positionality.

4.1. Research Paradigm

The study adopts an interpretivist stance [58,59], which holds that social reality is constructed through meaning-making practices that require interpretive engagement with texts, discourses, and practices. Methodology must be congruent with ontology. If development knowledge is culturally situated, researching its transfer requires methods attuned to cultural meaning. This is operationalised through three complementary qualitative approaches [60,61].

4.2. Philosophical Concept Analysis

Following comparative philosophy approaches [27,33], the analysis examines compatibility between Sinicised Marxist principles and Ubuntu frameworks through (1) textual identification of core Sinicised Marxist concepts from primary sources [6,7,31]; (2) indigenous conceptual mapping of parallel Ubuntu concepts (ubuntu, botho, ujamaa) from classical and contemporary texts [24–26]; and (3) systematic comparison of conceptual structures to identify structural resonances rather than identity.

The philosophical concept analysis is supplemented by attention to the historical and political processes through which concepts are translated and transformed. Drawing on policy translation theory [9,10], the analysis examines not only the semantic content of concepts but also the power relations and institutional dynamics that shape their movement across contexts. This approach recognises that philosophical concepts are not abstract entities that float free of history but are embedded in specific social and political formations.

4.3. Comparative Case Study Design

Following [61,62], the study employs purposive sampling of two theoretically relevant cases. Case 1: Tanzania's Ujamaa Policy (1967–1985) examines how an indigenised socialist policy affected national identity, state legitimacy, and democratic accountability [22,50]. Case 2: Ethiopia's Developmental State (1991–present) examines achievements and vulnerabilities of China-inspired state-led development [51–53]. Data collection involved document analysis of policy documents, party manifestos, development plans, and scholarly analyses. Analysis proceeds through within-case narrative construction followed by cross-case synthesis.

The case selection is informed by the theoretical framework's emphasis on structural resonance and policy translation. Tanzania and Ethiopia are selected not as representative cases of African development but as theoretically illuminating cases that allow the paper to examine the mechanisms of ideological adaptation in different historical and political contexts. The analysis acknowledges that both cases are embedded in broader regional and global dynamics, including Cold War geopolitics, post-Cold War liberalisation, and contemporary China-Africa relations. The comparative analysis does not aim to establish causal generalisations but to identify configurations of resonance and dissonance that shape the possibilities and constraints of ideological exchange.

4.4. Critical Discourse Analysis

Applying [63]'s three-dimensional framework, the study analyses narratives of China-Africa ideological exchange across three discursive domains: (1) Chinese official discourse (FOCAC declarations, Communist Party of China (CPC) documents, China Daily 2025); (2) African elite discourse (speeches, interviews, e.g., Wachira & Matambo in Ecns.cn, accessed on 10 October 2026); (3) scholarly and media discourse (peer-reviewed scholarship,

policy reports). The analysis examines text, discursive practice, and social practice to identify how power operates through categories and frameworks.

4.5. Thematic Analysis

Data integration follows [64]'s six-phase thematic analysis: familiarisation, initial coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and writing. Trustworthiness is enhanced through triangulation across methods and sources, peer debriefing, and reflexive journaling [65].

4.6. Ethical Considerations and Positionality

Following decolonial methodological principles [12,66], the study commits to: (1) centring African voices and knowledge systems; (2) acknowledging Africa's diversity and resisting continental generalisations; (3) maintaining critical distance from Sino-celebratory and Afro-pessimist discourses; (4) ensuring accessibility to African policymakers and intellectuals. The researcher's positionality, located within Global South knowledge institutions, is addressed through reflexive journaling and engagement with African philosophy as a theoretical resource rather than data.

In this vein, the author affirms that he has no involvement with Chinese foreign policy or programmes on the African continent. The research was conducted independently, without funding or institutional affiliation that might compromise scholarly independence. The author's positionality is shaped by a commitment to African epistemic sovereignty and a critical engagement with both Chinese and Western development models.

5. Findings

This section presents the empirical and analytical outcomes of the study, organised around five thematic areas. It first examines the philosophical resonances between Ubuntu and Sinicised Marxism, followed by an assessment of the lessons drawn from Tanzania's Ujamaa and Ethiopia's developmental state. Subsequently, it analyses the competing discourses shaping China-Africa relations and culminates in the proposal of an analytical framework for adapted resonance.

5.1. Philosophical Resonance of Ubuntu and Sinicised Marxism

The comparative analysis of philosophical resonances between Ubuntu and Sinicised Marxism requires careful attention to the specific dimensions of resonance and dissonance. This section provides a detailed and nuanced analysis of the four structural factors identified in the theoretical framework: ontological, ethical, political, and epistemological orientations.

Firstly, Ontological Resonance is evident in the relational ontologies articulated by both traditions. Ubuntu's *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* asserts that personhood is constituted through relationships [25], while Sinicised Marxism, drawing on Confucianism, emphasises human fulfilment through the proper ordering of relationships [6]. Both contrast sharply with Western methodological individualism. However, the analysis must acknowledge that the specific forms of relationality differ. Confucian relationality is hierarchical and role-based, emphasising proper conduct within differentiated social positions, while Ubuntu relationality emphasises communal solidarity and mutual care. The resonance is at the level of ontological orientation. Both traditions reject the atomistic individual of liberal theory, but not at the level of specific institutional forms.

Secondly, Ethical Resonance emerges in the shared prioritisation of collective well-being over individual accumulation. Ubuntu ethics of sharing, mutual care, and communal responsibility are empirically documented [26], whilst Sinicised Marxism prioritises collective well-being and social harmony as ethical goods [7,35]. However, the ethical orientations are not identical. Confucian ethics emphasises harmony through proper hierarchical relationships, while Ubuntu ethics emphasises solidarity through communal interdependence. The resonance is at the level of ethical orientation. Both traditions locate ethical value in collective flourishing rather than individual accumulation, but the specific content of the ethical commitments differs.

Thirdly, Political Resonance appears in how both traditions conceptualise legitimate governance as serving collective interests through ethical leadership. Ubuntu-based governance emphasises consensus and restorative justice [24], and Sinicised Marxism's people-centred governance similarly positions the state as solely serving the people [6]. However, there is a significant difference between traditional governance institutions, which are characterised by consultative decision-making within an aristocratic domain, and a centralised state organised around a one-party system. Ubuntu-based governance operates at the local level, with village headmen or chiefs overseeing community dialogue prior to making decisions that reflect consensus. Critically, this is entirely voluntary on the part

of the traditional ruler, and a decision can be re-heard in a formal, modern legal environment if one party seeks recourse to the decision. This is quite different from a centralised state organised around a one-party system. Regarding political resonance, it is imperative to acknowledge that it is at the level of broad orientation. Even though both traditions value governance that serves collective interests, the institutional forms are different.

Fourthly, Epistemological Resonance is evident in the shared emphasis on practical engagement and collective deliberation. The Marxist emphasis on praxis as the criterion of truth resonates with Confucian emphasis on learning through practice and social interaction [4,36]. Ubuntu epistemology similarly prioritises collective wisdom and lived experience over abstract individual reasoning [27,28]. However, the specific forms of epistemological practice differ.

In summary, these resonances are structural, not substantive. Adapted resonance does not require African societies to adopt Chinese philosophical categories but enables them to engage Chinese experience through indigenous frameworks. As [28] argue, Ubuntu's decolonial value lies in grounding alternative modes of thinking from a position of epistemic strength. However, it is necessary to acknowledge the limits of resonance. The configuration of resonances and dissonances shapes the possibilities and constraints of ideological exchange. The Chinese case involved significant dissonance in political orientation (between Confucian hierarchical governance and Marxist egalitarianism) that was resolved through creative synthesis. The African cases examined next reveal different configurations of resonance and dissonance, with important implications for development outcomes.

5.2. Ujamaa's Lessons: Successes and Failures

Ujamaa demonstrates that indigenised socialist policies can foster state identification and legitimacy when they resonate with indigenous values and are effectively transmitted through education [22]. However, coercive implementation, forced villagisation, and suppression of dissent contradicted communal values, generating resistance and economic decline [48,49]. The trade-off of lowered democratic accountability also reveals tensions. Adapted resonance requires consistent embodiment of indigenous values in policy design and implementation, not merely philosophical alignment.

Further, the Ujamaa experience also illuminates the complex relationship between Tanzania's experiment and Chinese development experience. As noted earlier, Tanzanian policies of self-reliance, rural villagisation, and nationalisation drew on Chinese models but were adapted to local conditions through the idiom of Ujamaa. This suggests that the relationship between China and Tanzania is not one of model and imitator but of overlapping and mutually constitutive experiments in ideological adaptation. The Ujamaa case thus demonstrates that adapted resonance is not a simple matter of applying a pre-existing model but an active process of translation and transformation in which both source and recipient contexts are changed.

5.3. Ethiopia's Developmental State: Achievements and Vulnerabilities

Ethiopia achieved substantial gains in infrastructure, poverty reduction, and basic services through state-led development inspired by East Asian models. Mechanisms reflected selective adaptation of East Asian patterns to Ethiopian conditions [51,52]. Yet vulnerabilities such as overvalued currency, unsustainable debt, and insufficient productivity growth led to debt default in 2023. The case suggests that learning from China must extend beyond policy borrowing to deeper institutional transformation; external models cannot substitute for building indigenous institutional capacity.

However, the Ethiopian case must be situated within broader dynamics of global financial governance. Ethiopia's debt crisis and subsequent IMF/World Bank reform programme reflect not only domestic policy choices but also the structural constraints imposed by the international financial system. Similar dynamics can be observed in Tanzania, which has also experienced indebtedness and conditionality. Therefore, it should be acknowledged that the "lesson" from the Ethiopian case is not simply that rapid results lead to a debt crisis but that all African states face structural constraints that shape their development options. The concept of adapted resonance must thus be understood as operating within these constraints, not as a magic bullet that can transcend them.

Across the two cases, the common mechanism is political mediation. In Tanzania, a local socialist idiom did not prevent coercion or adjustment. In Ethiopia, selective external learning did not eliminate domestic agency or international dependence. These contrasts challenge the simple expectation that stronger ethical familiarity yields better development. The cases instead motivate investigation of who controls implementation and who can alter an arrangement when its costs emerge. Table 2, presented below, provides a structured comparison of Tanzania and Ethiopia.

Table 2. Structured comparison of Tanzania and Ethiopia.

Dimension	Tanzania	Ethiopia
Purpose and translation	Familyhood and self-reliance articulated by Nyerere and mediated through party and state institutions.	State-led transformation mediated through EPRDF institutions and selective East Asian learning.
Principal period	1967–1985; the 1986 adjustment provides a subsequent policy turning point.	1991–2018; the 2024 IMF programme provides a subsequent reform point.
Policy instruments	Villagisation, rural organisation, education and collective production.	Public investment, infrastructure and industrial policy.
External connections	China–Tanzania cooperation, including TAZARA; other donors and later IMF/World Bank support.	Chinese cooperation alongside other international financing, policy advice and domestic revolutionary histories.
Institutional tension	Communal purpose versus coercive relocation and limited challenge to implementation.	Developmental ambition versus concentrated authority and unequal capacity to influence decisions.
Material constraints	Agricultural performance, administrative capacity and external financing; adjustment from 1986.	Productive capability, foreign exchange and debt; conflict and shocks complicate attribution.
What the evidence supports	Published accounts identify contradictory implementation and durable political legacies.	Published accounts describe state-led transformation and subsequent macroeconomic reform.
What it cannot establish	That indigenous language caused success, failure or later adjustment.	That China-inspired borrowing caused debt distress or that cultural affinity predicts performance.

5.4. Mutual Empowerment vs. Extractivism

Critical discourse analysis reveals three competing narratives. First, a mutual empowerment discourse [43] frames China-Africa partnership as South-South solidarity, opening space for adapted resonance by offering lessons rather than prescriptions. Second, a capacity-building discourse emphasises knowledge transfer and skill development, aligning with adapted resonance by centring African agency [54,67,68]. Third, a critical counter-discourse identifies extractive practices, environmental impacts, and labour contradictions [15,44,47], complicating adapted resonance by revealing that Chinese engagement carries both transformative and extractive potentials.

The critical counter-discourse has been significantly enriched by the work of Patrick Bond and William Robinson. Refs. [36,37] has demonstrated that China's engagement with Africa is structured by extractive imperatives and unequal exchange that reproduce patterns of dependency, even as it challenges Western dominance. Similarly, ref. [38] has argued that appeals to anti-imperialist solidarity can obscure the reproduction of exploitative relations. These perspectives caution against a purely philosophical analysis of adapted resonance that neglects the material and geopolitical dimensions of China-Africa relations. This paper takes cognisance of the interplay between philosophical resonances and material interests. It recognises that the possibilities for adapted resonance are shaped not only by philosophical compatibility but also by the structural constraints of the global political economy.

African elite discourse navigates these narratives with sophistication. For example, Kenyan and South African experts appreciate Chinese long-term planning while acknowledging that Africa cannot replicate China's model wholesale, emphasising the need to build indigenous capabilities in artificial intelligence and digital sovereignty [67]. This exemplifies the critical engagement that adapted resonance requires neither rejection nor mimicry, but selective appropriation subordinated to African priorities.

5.5. Analytical Framework for Adapted Resonance

Synthesising findings, the paper proposes four dimensions essential to successful adaptation. First, epistemic grounding requires that engagement with external ideas be grounded in indigenous philosophical frameworks. Such frameworks provide the necessary resources for evaluating, selecting, and transforming foreign concepts [24–26]. Without this foundational epistemic anchor, external ideas risk being adopted uncritically, reproducing the very dependencies that adapted resonance seeks to overcome.

Second, structural resonance demands that external ideas resonate structurally rather than substantively with indigenous frameworks. Resonance at the level of fundamental commitments, such as relational versus individualist ontologies or communal versus accumulative ethics, enables productive synthesis without requiring identity between traditions. This structural compatibility allows foreign concepts to be creatively reinterpreted through indigenous lenses rather than imposed as fixed templates.

Third, selective appropriation refers to the capacity to distinguish between elements of external models that serve indigenous purposes and those that reproduce dependency or contradiction. Not all components of a foreign development experience are equally transferable or desirable; successful adaptation requires discerning judgment about what to adopt, what to reject, and what to transform.

Fourth, indigenous institutionalisation insists that external ideas must ultimately be institutionalised through indigenous frameworks. This means building local organisations, practices, and capabilities that are rooted in the specific social, cultural, and historical contexts of African societies. As the cases of Tanzania's Ujamaa and Ethiopia's developmental state illustrate, failure to embed external ideas within indigenous institutional structures often leads to coercive implementation, brittle outcomes, and eventual collapse.

In sum, these four dimensions are not sequential stages but mutually constitutive elements of a continuous process. Epistemic grounding provides the foundation for structural resonance, which in turn enables selective appropriation, which must be embodied in indigenous institutionalisation. The process is iterative and contested, involving ongoing struggles over meaning and power. As policy translation theory emphasises [9,10], the movement of ideas across contexts is never a simple matter of transfer but always involves interpretation, adaptation, and transformation. Thus, the adapted resonance framework is intended to provide analytical resources for understanding and navigating this complexity.

6. Discussion

This section reflects on the broader significance of the study's findings and their implications for theory, policy, and future research. It begins by examining the theoretical contributions of the adapted resonance framework to decolonial scholarship, constructivist norm localisation, and diffusionist accounts of knowledge transfer. Subsequently, it draws out practical implications for African policymakers seeking to engage with Chinese development experience. The section also offers a candid discussion of the study's limitations and identifies priority avenues for future empirical and comparative research.

6.1. Theoretical Implications

The adapted resonance framework challenges diffusionist assumptions that knowledge flows unidirectionally from developed to developing contexts [18,20]. By demonstrating how Chinese Marxism emerged through indigenous synthesis and how African societies might similarly transform external ideas, the framework centres agency and creativity in knowledge reception. It also contributes to decolonial scholarship by specifying mechanisms for achieving epistemic sovereignty [1,15]. Finally, it extends constructivist norm localisation scholarship by highlighting the role of philosophical resonance and compatibility at the level of fundamental worldviews in shaping productive engagement.

The framework also contributes to the growing literature on policy translation [9–12]. To offer a more analytically rigorous approach to understanding South-South knowledge exchange than binary narratives of adoption or rejection, this paper integrates insights from policy translation theory with decolonial theory and African philosophy. The concept of adapted resonance, therefore, specifies the conditions under which translation is likely to succeed, such as the structural compatibility between source and recipient philosophical frameworks [68]. However, it must be acknowledged that translation is always a political process involving power relations and struggles over meaning. This integration of philosophical analysis with policy translation theory represents a distinctive contribution to the literature on South-South cooperation.

6.2. Practical Implications for African Policymakers

African policymakers are advised to diagnose rather than adopt. They should seek to understand the mechanisms and conditions underlying Chinese development successes, rather than copying policies wholesale. The guiding question should be: "Why does China do it?" not "What does China do?" Furthermore, engagement must be grounded in indigenous frameworks, using Ubuntu and other philosophical resources as criteria for judgment [24–26].

Building institutional capacity is another crucial implication. Ethiopia's vulnerabilities demonstrate that borrowing external models cannot substitute for building indigenous institutions. Accordingly, policymakers should prioritise training, organisational strengthening, and system development.

Finally, regional coordination is essential. Leveraging platforms such as the African Continental Free Trade Area and regional economic communities can strengthen negotiating capacity and ensure that cooperation serves continental priorities [67].

In addition to these practical implications, the paper's analysis suggests that African policymakers should attend to the material and geopolitical dimensions of China-Africa relations. As [36–38] have argued, the possibilities for adapted resonance are shaped not only by philosophical compatibility but also by the structural constraints of the global political economy. Policymakers must therefore navigate the tension between engaging Chinese development experience as a resource for indigenous development and avoiding new forms of dependency

and extraction. The concept of adapted resonance is intended to provide analytical resources for this navigation, but it cannot substitute for political struggle over the terms of engagement.

6.3. Limitations and Future Research

First, as a conceptual and methodological framework paper, empirical findings remain provisional pending full fieldwork. Therefore, future research should incorporate participatory methods centring African voices [26,66,68]. Second, the focus on philosophical resonance may underemphasise material dimensions (extractive practices, debt, environmental impacts); future research should examine their interaction with ideological exchange. Third, qualitative orientation prioritises depth over generalisability; comparative methods across more African cases could identify conditions for success or failure. Fourth, the focus on Ubuntu should be complemented by examination of other indigenous traditions (Akan, Yoruba, Ethiopian Orthodox, etc.), each offering distinctive resources.

Fifth, the paper's analysis of the Chinese case relies primarily on secondary sources and English-language scholarship. Future research would benefit from engagement with primary sources in Chinese and from collaboration with Chinese scholars. Sixth, the paper's treatment of the relationship between Tanzania and China, and Ethiopia and China, is necessarily selective and could be deepened through archival research and oral history. Seventh, the paper's engagement with policy translation theory, while significant, could be further developed through empirical analysis of specific policy translation processes in African contexts.

7. Conclusions

This study has examined the potential for Africa to learn from China's experience of adapting Marxism, not by copying Chinese models but by emulating the process of indigenisation. The concept of "adapted resonance" describes a process whereby foreign ideas are selected, reinterpreted, and transformed through alignment with indigenous philosophical frameworks, a process China demonstrated in Sinicising Marxism, and that African societies might analogously pursue.

The findings suggest that conditions for adapted resonance exist. Philosophical analysis reveals structural resonances between Sinicised Marxism and Ubuntu. On one hand, Tanzania's Ujamaa demonstrates both possibilities and limitations of indigenised socialist development. On the other hand, Ethiopia's developmental state trajectory illuminates achievements and vulnerabilities of China-inspired modelling. Discourse analysis reveals competing narratives that structure possibilities for adapted resonance while exposing tensions between China's rhetoric and practices.

The crucial insight is that China's value for African development lies not in providing a model to be copied but in demonstrating that indigenisation is possible, that foreign ideas can be transformed through engagement with indigenous philosophical traditions and lived experiences. This liberates African thinkers from the false choice between rejecting external ideas entirely or accepting them uncritically. It suggests a third path: selective appropriation grounded in indigenous frameworks. This paper has termed this creative synthesis "adapted resonance."

In terms of contributions, the paper first presents the concept of adapted resonance as an analytical alternative to diffusionist models of policy transfer, arguing that successful ideological exchange requires structural compatibility between source and recipient philosophical frameworks rather than substantive identity. Second, it demonstrates that policy translation theory provides a more analytically rigorous approach to understanding China-Africa knowledge exchange than binary narratives of adoption or rejection. Third, it offers a historically grounded comparative analysis of Tanzania's Ujamaa and Ethiopia's developmental state that illuminates both the possibilities and limitations of indigenising external development models.

As African nations navigate a multipolar world, the capacity for such creative synthesis may determine whether the twenty-first century realises the long-deferred promise of authentic African development. The goal is not to become like China or any other external model, but to become more fully African, drawing on indigenous philosophical resources to engage the world from a position of epistemic strength. If a 5000-year-old civilisation could transform a European philosophical tradition into something authentically Chinese, then African civilisations might similarly transform external ideas into vehicles for indigenous development. The challenge is not mimicry but creation, and that is a task no external model can perform.

However, this conclusion must be tempered by an acknowledgment of the material and geopolitical constraints that shape Africa's engagement with China. As the critical scholarship on China-Africa relations has demonstrated [36–38], the possibilities for adapted resonance are not unlimited. The structural asymmetries of the global political economy, the extractive imperatives of resource-dependent growth, and the conditionalities imposed by international financial institutions all constrain the space for genuine epistemic sovereignty. The concept of adapted resonance is therefore offered not as a solution to these structural problems but as an analytical

resource for navigating them. It provides a framework for understanding how African societies can engage external ideas from a position of epistemic strength, even as they confront the material constraints that limit their room for manoeuvre. The task of building genuinely indigenous development remains unfinished, and it requires not only philosophical creativity but also political struggle.

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