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Chinese Migrants in Africa: Bilateral and Informal Governance of a Poorly Understood South-South Flow

Giles Mohan & Ben Lampert, The Open University, UK

Draft paper prepared for the UNRISD Conference
Regional Governance of Migration and Socio-Political Rights:
Institutions, Actors and Processes
14-15 January 2013, Geneva, Switzerland





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UNRISD, Palais des Nations
1211 Geneva 10, Switzerland

Tel: +41 (0)22 9173020
Fax: +41 (0)22 9170650
info@unrisd.org
www.unrisd.org

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The conference organisers would like to acknowledge the financial support received by the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung.

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Abstract

The paper examines the social and political dynamics of Chinese migrants in Africa. Implicit in much of the literature on ‘China in Africa’ is a power relation in which the Chinese hold the whip hand. Moreover analytical attention has focussed overwhelmingly on aggregate ‘South-South’ flows of trade or FDI, or bilateral projects as opposed to the activities of the myriad independent Chinese entrepreneurs that have migrated to Africa. While we do not want to reverse the structuralist lens to say that Africa/ns have endless options we want to examine how African social and political agency plays into these unfolding relationships. Our argument is that the increased Chinese presence in Africa does not represent some form of harmonious ‘South-South’ cooperation but Africans are managing the relationship in ways that create significant opportunities for their development. Based on recent fieldwork in Angola, Ghana, and Nigeria, the paper addresses a number of key dimensions around the governance of this migration. Our data show African state institutions, firms and individuals contesting and shaping these engagements in ways that benefit them. Much of the relationship is brokered, and subsequently governed, by pacts between Chinese and African elite state actors. These tend to be relatively unaccountable and non-transparent processes with the Chinese investments bolstering the legitimacy of African regimes. These relationships are presented by the Chinese as ‘win-win’ and not interfering in domestic political processes, yet they do intervene and increasingly so in contexts where security of investments and personnel are threatened. This was amply demonstrated in the recent Libyan evacuation though this only covered labour migrants on official contracts and not independent migrants. That said where the quality of Chinese investment is held to account by African states and civil societies we generally see better developmental impacts. Central to much of this are the differences in the national laws and enforcement regimes of the ‘host’ societies, around labour, immigration and investment. This holds a potential lesson for managing ‘China-Africa’ relations in that a strong legislative base with effective enforcement can deliver development dividends from small scale investments besides the big infrastructure projects heralded in the press. Beyond these more formal inter-state relations we see migration and investment governed in a number of informal ways, notably organisations such as local associations of market traders. It is often these forms of agency that spark the formal governance system into action. Many successful Chinese firms have local patrons who give credibility, contacts and protection. We have evidence of African firms employing Chinese labour, expertise and technology. African entrepreneurs actively encouraging Chinese investment outside of the formal, bilateral arrangements drive some of this. In this sense governance of Chinese-African migration is national and/or informal rather than regional.

Introduction: Bilateralism and Beyond in China-Africa Relations

This paper focuses on Chinese migrants in Africa and is inspired by Alden's comment that "The behaviour of thousands of newly settled Chinese businessmen and the conduct of the African communities in which they live and work will matter as much as the diplomacy and concessions made at the government level" (Alden 2007: 128). To date much of the focus on China in Africa has been on the diplomatic efforts and their relationship to a mutually enriching 'South-South' cooperation. Notably, meetings like the Forum on China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) are rightly seen as central to the official foreign policy of China in Africa (Taylor 2011). Yet, as Alden indicates, there is much more to South-South flows than high-level politicking and concessional financing for big infrastructures projects.

Even though the Chinese government frequently sponsors engagements with African nations, independent migrants also settled in a number of African countries, in tandem with the positive diplomatic relations. In absolute numbers, the percentages of Chinese migrants to Africa are relatively small, when compared to all emigration from China (IOM 2010). Still, the growing presence of Chinese workers and business people in Africa precipitated questions as to whether their presence is beneficial through such things as enhancing entrepreneurial activity or whether the inexpensive goods they bring and the infrastructure they build in order to access natural resources constitute a new 'imperialism' that exploits Africa.

In terms of the governance of these migration flows there is very little systematic data. Most of the work has focused on the aid-governance nexus where the Chinese are accused by some of unscrupulous behaviour that undermines good governance (Tull 2006). Yet there is much more to the governance issue than whether Chinese lending supports authoritarian regimes or if investment comes without consideration of human rights (see Gu et al. 2008). The paper argues that these new migration flows from China to Africa are significant given that they are made up of state-sponsored construction teams or independent entrepreneurs, all of which make significant economic impacts on host societies. Yet the governance of these flows is not coherent or planned. Rather, a range of different actors are involved in the governance of this migration and they operate through informal and formal modes of regulation. Crucially, in contrast to analyses that attribute power to China at the expense of Africa we argue that African social and political agency is central to the governance of these relationships. These relationships also exceed bilateral arrangements and are often a multi-layered and/or networked phenomenon.

The paper starts by trying to make sense of the limited data on the scale of this migration. This discussion highlights the need for disaggregation of flows according to the motives and actors involved. In turn this sets up a consideration of the historical drivers of this migration, the different actors involved, and some of the theories used to explain the social and political underpinnings of these relationships. We then examine the specific nature of the governance in place, which is often bilateral and unaccountable, but also takes place through less bounded relationships and is increasingly influenced by a range of civil society actors.

Dubious Data

But how significant is this China-Africa migration? While most observers accept that China sent an increased number of workers to Africa, particularly in the last decade, a major problem is that data are speculative (see Figure 1). Notwithstanding, these data lend themselves to several interpretations. First, data shows that sizeable, long-standing Chinese migrant communities in South Africa and Mauritius date back to the colonial period and that more recent immigration consisted of 1980s arrivals from Hong Kong and Taiwan.¹ Second, the data also shows that the rapid increases in Chinese immigration to Africa over the past seven years coincide not only with China's increased Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), but also with China's trade with various African countries. The Xinhua Press Agency estimated that as many as 750,000 Chinese may be working or living in Africa for extended periods.² The most significant growth is found in countries with significant oil resources, notably Nigeria, Angola and Sudan.

Figure 1: Estimates for Chinese in selected African countries, various sources.

Country	1963 (Chang 1968)	2000, unless ^ for 1989 (Chinese sources)	2001 (Ohio Database, cited in Sautman ³)	Estimate for 2003-2007 (Sautman ⁴ and Hairong ⁴ plus various)
South Africa	5105	70000	30000*	100000-400000 (2007)+
Mauritius	23266	40000	35000 (for year 1990)**	30000 (2005)+
Cameroon	N/A	450	50	1000-3000 (2005)+
Sudan	N/A	45^	45	5000-10000 (2004- 2005)***
Lesotho	N/A	2500	1000	5000 (2005)+
Ghana	N/A	465	500	6000 (2004)+
Liberia	27	45^	120	600 (2006)+
Nigeria	2	10000	2000	100000 (2007)
Mozambique	1735	500	700	1500 (2006)+
Ethiopia	18	8	100	3000-4000 (2006)+
Algeria	N/A	30	2000	8000 (2003)+
Cote d'Ivoire	N/A	1300	200	10000 (2007)+
Zimbabwe	303	500	300	10000 (2007)+

¹Zhang⁵; QiaoQing (2005); + Sautman and Hairong⁶; * Poston et al.⁷; ** Poston et al.⁸;
*** Abdalla Ali⁹

¹ Anshan Li, *Chinese diaspora in Africa* (Beijing: Peking University Centre on Overseas Chinese, 2005)

² Howard French and Lydia Polgreen, "Chinese flocking in numbers to a new frontier: Africa." International Herald Tribune, August 17th 2007. <http://www.iht.com/articles/2007/08/17/news/malawi.php>

³ Sautman and Hairong, "Friends and Interests".

⁴ Sautman and Hairong, "Friends and Interests".

⁵ W Zhang, *HuaqiaoHuaRenGaiShu*, (Beijing: Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council, CCP, 1993).

This paucity of reliable data raises three further issues. First, history is crucial to understanding the periodization of migration and its relationships to economic and geopolitical forces. Second, we need to focus on the social and geographical characteristics of migrants, especially on those differences *within* sub-communities of overseas Chinese.¹⁰ A third concern, which arises from the previous issue, is how the specific historical environments and current cultural settings impact the Chinese migrant community and their developmental activities. We examine these three issues in more detail before turning to an analysis of the governance of these flows.

Disaggregating Flows Across Time and Space

This section picks up these arguments around needing a finer grained analysis of the historical drivers of China-Africa migration, the dynamic nature of Chinese ‘communities’ in Africa, and the relationships between migrants and political processes.

Histories of China-Africa migration

For some, China’s growing presence in Africa is a relatively new phenomenon that is likened to an opportunistic resource grab (Mawdsley 2008). Such an analysis is flawed to the extent that it overlooks the long history of contact and support between the peoples of these regions. Even though this paper focuses on more recent Chinese migration to Africa, these movements connect to longer histories of South-South migration, which in some cases go back over centuries.

The sweeping concept *South-South migration* also obscures layers of historical and geographical complexity. This concept, for example, fails to challenge conventional definitions of the South.¹¹ The common sense definition has no meaning even if we can now, i.e., *ex post*, label the South. If *South* denotes a lack of development, many of these regions were *not* less developed when the migrations took place. Chinese traders first engaged with East Africa in the fifteenth century or earlier (Li 2012), when China was in absolute and relative terms far more developed than a great many contemporaneous European regions.¹² Therefore, historical perspective remains critical to any effort to calculate the significance of present South-South flows.

These longer histories are important because, in some contexts, they set up patterns of migration that continue today. For example, the coolie labour of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century gave rise to Chinese communities that, to an extent, anchored subsequent migrants. However, there is no necessary path dependency in these

⁶ Sautman and Hairong, “Friends and Interests”.

⁷ Dudley Poston Jr., Michael Mao, and Mei-Yu Yu, “The Global Distribution of the Overseas Chinese Around 1990.” *Population and Development Review* 20(3) (1994). Put the number in 1993 at 36,000

⁸ Poston et al, “Overseas Chinese”

⁹ Ali Abdalla Ali, “The political economy of relations between Sudan and China,” in *China in Africa: Mercantilist predator or partner in development?* ed. Garth Le Pere (Braamfontein: Institute for Global Dialogue and South African Institute for International Affairs, 2007). Puts the number in 2004 at 24,000

¹⁰ Xiang Biao, *Promoting Knowledge Exchange through diaspora networks: The case of the PRC* (Oxford: University of Oxford Compas Report, 2005). <http://www.adb.org/Documents/Reports/GCF/reta6117-prc.pdf>.

¹¹ Bakewell, *South-South Migration*.

¹² Martin Jacques, *When China Rules the World: The Rise of the Middle Kingdom and the End of the Western World* (London: Allen Lane, 2009).

migration flows since *old* and *new* Chinese migrants do not always interact. This apparent alienation cautions against *homogenizing* the Chinese and urges us to look at the forces driving emigration from China.¹³

As recently as the eighteenth century, China's policies purposefully discouraged outbound migration.¹⁴ These policies changed, however, with the Opium Wars that enabled colonial powers to reduce restrictions on Chinese emigration. These changes precipitated large-scale, overseas movements of Chinese labourers in the purported coolie trade.¹⁵¹⁶ Even though historians exaggerate the impact of the coolie trade as the paradigm of Chinese migration, most of these labour contracts were tightly regulated and workers were sent back after their contracts expired. Small, but enterprising groups of independent traders, based in China, serviced these labour migrants and also engaged in small-scale export.¹⁷

In 1949 the newly founded People's Republic of China (PRC) reversed these policies and officially ended outbound emigration. The defeated Kuomintang withdrew to Taiwan and established the Republic of China (ROC, commonly known as Taiwan). Taiwan is important because many Taiwanese firms operate in Africa whereas the PRC, which has given its *One China* demand unswerving priority since Taiwan's creation, offers favourable aid terms to African countries that support its claims to Taiwan. The Cold War's geopolitical strategy in Africa found China challenging the major superpowers through its conspicuous targeting of aid.¹⁸ Between the 1960s and the early 1980s at least 150,000 Chinese technical assistants arrived in Africa.¹⁹ Although the numbers of aid workers were not huge, and many stayed only temporarily, significant amounts remained behind to pursue commercial activities.²⁰ At the same time, China's domestic perception of Overseas Chinese shifted from a view that they were traitors to a view that cast them as new vanguards of Third World anti-colonialism.²¹

China's more recent emigration patterns occurred in the wake of that nation's 1970s economic reforms that some observers believe weakened the state's role in its peoples' movements.²² The economic reforms included the total or partial privatisation of State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs), and latterly encouraged a globalization strategy that stimulated foreign investment. On top of this the Chinese assumed a neutral attitude towards emigration, and attempted to divorce out bound migration from geopolitical and

¹³ Janet Wilhelm, "The Chinese Communities in South Africa." In *State of the Nation: South Africa 2005-2006* ed. Sakhela Buhlungu et al (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2006).

¹⁴ Simon Shen, "A constructed (un)reality on China's re-entry into Africa: the Chinese online community perception of Africa (2006–2008)," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 47 (2009).

¹⁵ Sen-Dou Chang, "The Distribution and Occupations of Overseas Chinese." *Geographical Review* 58/1 (1968).

¹⁶ Yoon Park, "Sojourners to Settlers: Early Constructions of Chinese Identity in South Africa, 1879-1949," *African Studies* 65/2 (2006).

¹⁷ Lynn Pan, *The Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas* (Singapore: Nanyang Technological University, 2005).

¹⁸ Deborah Brautigam, *Chinese Aid and African Development: Exporting Green Revolution* (Basingstoke: Macmillan and New York: St Martins, 1998).

¹⁹ Brautigam, *Chinese Aid*.

²⁰ Elizabeth Hsu, "Zanzibar and its Chinese Communities," *Population, Space and Place*. 13 (2007).

²¹ Mette Thuno, "Reaching Out and Incorporating Chinese Overseas: The Trans-territorial Scope of the PRC by the End of the twentieth Century," *The China Quarterly* 168 (2001).

²² Thuno, "Reaching Out", Biao Xiang "Emigration from China: A Sending Country Perspective." *International Migration* 41/3 (2003).

ideological concerns.²³ China's populous provinces saw the government allow private labour recruitment projects to be deregulated, and simultaneously allow the number of private labour contractors to grow.²⁴ African nations saw an inflow of cheap Chinese manufactures headed for local markets. Africa received private traders, and waves of independent workers migrated to Africa for economic reasons. Additionally, large numbers of state-sponsored construction teams and labourers came to work in the extractive industries.²⁵ Yet we must avoid treating a dynamic flow as only driven by changes in China. African social and political agency mediates these flows in important ways.

Diverse drivers, multiple communities

In order to understand the motives for Chinese migration we need a broad political economy perspective. This means acknowledging that capital is fragmented so that state activity and politics cannot be homogenized by reducing them to the needs of a 'unitary' capital. In terms of China's heightened role in Africa, an important differentiating factor is the scale and type of Chinese enterprise. We find three distinct groups.

First, temporary labour migrants are generally associated with large infrastructure projects.²⁶²⁷ Often the World's thirst for oil drives the need for such large numbers of foreign workers, even though the Chinese also engage in non-oil mineral resources. These projects are located near to Chinese personnel, who live in compounds, and have little contact with indigenous African communities.²⁸ For the most part, these compounds consist of Chinese expatriates on fixed term contracts, who return home after a few years.²⁹ This approach suggests that, whether intentionally or otherwise, China's policies have created an enclave for these labourers.³⁰

A second group of Chinese migrants to Africa consists of petty entrepreneurs, who usually work in trade, services and light manufacturing, but lack government backing.³¹ Researchers analysed the economic integration of Chinese migrant entrepreneurs through a construct of *embeddedness*, which argues that economic practices are *embedded* in social practices.³²³³ While Greenhalgh cautions against inclinations that superimpose a *Confucian* ethic upon all Chinese business organizations, ethnic communities can function as a "market for culturally defined goods, a pool of reliable

²³ Biao, "Emigration".

²⁴ Monina Wong, "Chinese workers in the garment industry in Africa: Implications of the contract labour dispatch system on the international labour movement", *Labour, Capital and Society*, 39/1 (2006).

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