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January 2009

# Chinese Migration in Africa

Yoon Jung Park

*South African Institute of International Affairs*  
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This paper is the outcome of research commissioned by SAIIA's China in Africa Project.

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The project seeks to develop an understanding of the motives, rationale and institutional structures guiding China's Africa policy, and to study China's growing power and influence so that they will help rather than hinder development in Africa. It further aims to assist African policymakers to recognise the opportunities presented by the Chinese commitment to the continent, and presents a platform for broad discussion about how to facilitate closer co-operation. The key objective is to produce policy-relevant research that will allow Africa to reap the benefits of interaction with China, so that a collective and integrated African response to future challenges can be devised that provides for constructive engagement with Chinese partners.

A 'China–Africa Toolkit' is being developed to serve African policymakers as an information database, a source of capacity building and a guide to policy formulation.

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## ABSTRACT

With all the scholarly and media interest in the China/Africa relationship of late, it is somewhat surprising that so little has been written about Chinese migrants in Africa. What little is published in media reports often presents the Chinese in increasingly confusing, inaccurate and negative ways. This paper seeks to address the misperceptions and the gaps, bringing together information from the few existing empirical studies on Chinese migrants in various African countries; these are supplemented by ongoing research currently being undertaken by the Chinese in Africa/Africans in China research working group and other independent scholars.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## INTRODUCTION

With all the scholarly and media interest in the China/Africa relationship of late, it is somewhat surprising that so little has been written about Chinese migrants in Africa. What little is published in media reports often presents the Chinese in increasingly confusing, inaccurate and negative ways. This report seeks to address the misperceptions and the gaps, bringing together information from the few existing empirical studies on Chinese migrants in various African countries; these are supplemented by ongoing research currently being undertaken by the Chinese in Africa/Africans in China research working group<sup>1</sup> and other independent scholars.

Most Chinese in Africa today are temporary migrants. They are employees of Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and independent Chinese companies. However, there are increasingly larger numbers of independent migrants arriving in Africa seeking economic opportunities. They come primarily from traditional sending regions in the coastal areas of China, but smaller numbers are also finding their way to Africa from the larger metropolitan cities and from newer sending regions in Central and North Eastern parts of China. Most migrants return to China after the completion of two- or three-year contracts; however, smaller numbers are choosing to start their own businesses across the continent. This report will briefly review the history of Chinese migration to Africa; explore current migration flows, patterns and trajectories; and examine the different types of migrants, settlement patterns, and relations with African host societies. Given the short time frame of these accelerated and intensified Chinese/African activities and interactions, it is too early to state whether or not some portion of these Chinese nationals are in Africa to stay or to determine what lasting impacts they have had on their host countries. That said, using the South Africa case, this report will also attempt to make some preliminary assessments about the future of Chinese migration trends in Africa.

## BRIEF HISTORY OF CHINESE IN AFRICA

The earliest confirmed Chinese migrants to African shores arrived with the Dutch East India Company in the Cape, now part of South Africa. Small numbers of convicts and company slaves arrived in the mid- to late-17<sup>th</sup> century, followed by a small number of contract labourers and artisans who arrived in South Africa's early colonies in the early to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, and later still over 63 000 contract miners imported to (and later exported from) the Transvaal between 1904–1910. While these histories are significant in terms of understanding the context into which free Chinese migrants entered South Africa and other African countries, their numbers were small. Most were eventually repatriated to China or they gradually integrated into South Africa's mixed race population.<sup>2</sup>

Modern China-Africa migrations have their roots in Chinese international policy under former Chairman Mao Zedong in the late 1950s. During this period, China's Africa policy was purely political; it fostered anti-colonial and post-colonial solidarity with newly independent African countries, most which now recognize the People's Republic of China. To help cement new diplomatic relations with African countries, Mao sent as many as 150 000 Chinese technicians and workers to the continent to work in agriculture, technology and infrastructure development. The single largest and most symbolic of the

era's China-Africa links was the Tanzania-Zambia railway, built by 50 000 Chinese workers. Almost all of these Chinese workers returned to China after completing their contracts.<sup>3</sup>

Current migration trends are linked to China's economic reforms of the late 1970s and the liberalization of emigration legislation in 1985.<sup>4</sup> Much of China's activity in Africa today is profit-centered rather than ideologically-based. Chinese aid packages and programmes in Africa, however, are still linked to temporary migration of Chinese workers. For example, over several decades, China has sent 15 000–20 000 medical personnel to Africa to assist in the development of hospitals and clinics. Over 10 000 agro-technicians have worked on some 200 agricultural projects involving the establishment of farms and agricultural stations as well as training. Hundreds of Chinese teachers have worked with African secondary and tertiary education. Many more Chinese have travelled to Africa on contracts to work on large construction projects on Africa's railways, roads, telecommunications systems, hospitals, schools and dams.<sup>5</sup>

However, policy changes in China have also resulted in 'a heterogeneous migration flow to different parts of the world... (wherein most) migrants concerned do not enter the established wage labour market in existing communities... but set up their own business, most commonly retail or wholesale of Chinese goods, Chinese restaurants or Chinese traditional medicine clinics.'<sup>6</sup> Relatively small but increasing numbers of these independent entrepreneurial Chinese migrants have landed in African countries throughout the continent.

## CURRENT MIGRATION FLOWS, PATTERNS, TRAJECTORIES

Official estimates of the number of Chinese in Africa vary dramatically. There are also increasingly diverse groups of Chinese migrants — in terms of language/dialect, sending region within China, class and educational level, and occupation — on the continent. What is clear is that the numbers have increased exponentially in the past six to eight years. Table 1 (see page 4) lists some of the Chinese population figures for 38 African countries for the period between 2001 and 2008.

As is clear from the table, estimates in some countries vary greatly. This can be attributed to lax immigration policies, poor tracking mechanisms, as well as corruption in many African countries allowing for high levels of illegal migration. Preliminary data also suggests that inflated numbers of Chinese is linked to increasing levels of anti-Chinese sentiment. For example, in both Namibia and Zambia, local press have reported upwards of 40 000 Chinese in each of those countries; real numbers range from 4 000 to 6 000. Both countries have recently witnessed high levels of public anti-Chinese sentiment as well as political and social mobilization of these feelings.

Total estimates range from around 580 000 to over 800 000 Chinese on the African continent. By far the largest number of Chinese can be found in South Africa, followed by Nigeria. Sudan, Angola, Algeria, and Mauritius are the only other countries with well over 10 000 Chinese. These numbers must be viewed in the context of existing population data, internal migration in China, as well as against numbers of Chinese diaspora in other parts of the globe. Chinese in South Africa still make up less than 1% of the entire population; the vast majority are concentrated in the Johannesburg-Pretoria area. There are approximately 400 000 Chinese in France; 600 000 Chinese in Japan; 900 000 Chinese

**Table 1: Number of Chinese in select African countries, ca. 2001 and 2003–2008<sup>7</sup>**

Country	Ohio U. Database 2001	Estimate for 200X	
Algeria	2,000	20,000	2007
Angola	500	20,000–40,000	2006
Benin	---	4,000	2007
Botswana	40	3,000–10,000	2006–07
Burkina Faso	---	1,000	2007
Burundi	---	150	2007
Cameroon	50	1,000–7,000	2005
Cape Verde	---	2,000	2006
Chad	---	300–500	2008
Congo (Brazzaville)	---	7,000	2006
Congo (Democratic Rep.)	200	500–10,000	2007
Cote d'Ivoire	200	10,000	2007
Egypt	110	6,000–10,000	2007
Ethiopia	100	3,000–7,000	2006
Ghana	500	6,000	2005
Gabon	---	6,000	nd
Guinea	---	5,000–8,000	2007
Kenya	190	7,000+	2007
Lesotho	1,000	5,000	2005
Liberia	120	600	2006
Libya	500	3,000	2008
Madagascar	30,000	60,000	2003
Malawi	40	2,000	2007
Mali	---	3,000–4,000	2008
Mauritius	40,000	30,000+	2008
Mozambique	700	1,500	2006
Namibia	---	5,000 (40,000)	2006
Niger	---	1,000	nd
Nigeria	2,000	100,000	2007
Reunión	20,000	25,000	2004
Senegal	--	2,000	2007
Sierra Leone	20	400–500	2008
South Africa	30,000	200,000–400,000	2007
Sudan	45	20,000–74,000	2007
Swaziland	90	300	2006
Tanzania	600	3,000–20,000	2006
Togo	50	3,000	2007
Tunisia	---	2,000	2008
Uganda	100	5,000–10,000	2007
Zambia	150	4,000–6,000 (40,000)	2007
Zimbabwe	300	5,300–10,000	2005–07
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>129,605</b>	<b>583,050–820,050</b>	

Sources: Ohio University 2001; Becker 2004; Chen 2003; AFP 2005; Tull 2005, fn. 98; *Sudan Tribune* 2005; Xinhuanet 2007; *Daily News* (Gaborone) 2006; AFP 2006d; PD 2002; DTe 2005; Weidlich 2006; *Namibian* 2006a; IRIN 2006b; Cure 2006; Ren 2007; DPA 2007; XH 2007b; Tian 2007; Hoffmann 2007; CCS 2006:19; Guineenews 2007; Green 2008; AFP 2008; Horta 2008; XH 2008; information from PRC embassies in Mozambique, Liberia, Ethiopia, 2006; Li 1999; Communications with Chinese living in Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, D.R. Congo, Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, Libya, Malawi, Mali, Senegal, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda and Zambia, 2005–2008; Alden 2007; Legeay-Gillon 2008.

in Canada; over 2.5 million Chinese in the US; and approximately 8 million in Malaysia. Furthermore, over the past 30 years, China has experienced probably the largest ever case of rural-urban migration in history and the situation continues to escalate. Reports indicate that there are over 140 million rural-to-urban migrants within China; there are further estimates that by 2025 there will be close to 250 000 million.<sup>8</sup> Finally, it would appear that many Africans are unable to distinguish between Chinese and other non-Indian Asians; the numbers indicated in Table 1 likely also include smaller numbers of Koreans, Japanese, and Malaysians as well as other smaller groups of non-Indian Asians. In many African countries, all people from East Asia are viewed as 'Chinese'.

The coastal provinces of China, particularly Guangdong, Zhejiang, and Fujian, have been, for many centuries, regions that sent migrants out into the world. Most of the world's overseas Chinese are from particular areas within these few provinces. In some villages, over 80% of the people have migrated over that past three to four centuries; these areas are 'characterised by a long-standing tradition of emigration that has gained self-sustaining momentum.'<sup>9</sup> It has become a rite of passage for the men (and more and more women) of these villages to spend at least some time overseas. Young people from these areas are under social pressure to go out into the world and return successful. Migration, then, becomes a measure of one's courage, worth, and success; it has become culturally valued. By extension, these areas become imbued with unique characteristics; Li Minghuan, based on research in southern Zhejiang, calls this 'qiaoxiang (or overseas Chinese area) consciousness', where the discourse about place and belonging presents the local area as special by virtue of its active linkages with the wider world.<sup>10</sup> These provinces continue to be the main sending regions for today's Chinese migrants to Africa; however, since the 1990s, migrants have also been arriving from new places of origin, including the great urban areas of Beijing, Tianjin and Shanghai. Ma Mung also reports on large numbers of migrants from the Dongbei region, including the north-east provinces of Heilongjiang, and Liaoning and Hubei of central China.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to migrants arriving in Africa directly from China, there are also a small number of migrants arriving in Africa from other overseas Chinese communities in Europe (France, Italy, Spain and Hungary) or from other African countries. Often there are linguistic connections between groups of migrants. Ma Mung writes, for example, of a 'French connection' between Chinese migrants from Wenzhou in Zhejiang province who lived in France for many years before migrating a second time to French-speaking African countries.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Carling and Haugen report that some Portuguese-speaking Chinese who initially settled in Cape Verde have moved on to Mozambique and Angola in response to increased competition from newer Chinese migrants in the small island nation.<sup>13</sup> There is also increasing anecdotal evidence of Chinese migrants from South Africa moving to smaller, less populated, and more secure countries in the region including Namibia, Zambia and Botswana.

Chinese migration flows have typically been oriented toward countries where entry regulations are less strict; some migrants enter these African countries with the intention of moving on to western countries. For example, in the past two decades, Chinese travelled to Hungary and other countries in Eastern and Central Europe or to Africa; these countries then serve as way stations before attempts to move onto Western Europe, the US or Canada. Chinese migrants, both independent and attached to Chinese businesses are arriving in African countries, often following paths cut earlier by Chinese diplomats,



Chinese multinational corporations, large Chinese infrastructure projects, and, in some cases, Taiwanese businesses.

Chinese arrive in Africa (and other parts) by various means. The immigration of a small number of Chinese professionals and labourers is arranged via direct government-to-government arrangement; this would be the case for Chinese medical doctors or agricultural advisors linked to development aid projects.<sup>14</sup> Increasingly, however, Chinese migration is arranged via government licensed private employment agencies that find and recruit workers. These agencies help workers obtain proper visa and travel documents. According to Politzer, most workers hired by such agencies tend to work in government-run projects in construction, oil fields and mines. Many independent migrants travel to Africa via informal social networks of friends, family, fellow villagers/townspeople, and other interpersonal connections. Some earlier migrants to Africa often help newer migrants, setting up semi-legal or unlicensed employment agencies, which sometimes charge high fees for a wide range of services. Often individuals take out personal loans to cover the costs of airfare and settling in expenses. Field research in the Free State indicates that many young people took out loans for large sums of money, which take years to repay. Finally, those who can not obtain legal means go through 'snakeheads' or human traffickers/smugglers. Apart from the government-to-government arrangements, the distinctions between the other three methods of transit can often be blurred.

## TYPES OF MIGRANTS

Emmanuel Ma Mung identifies three types of Chinese migrants to Africa: temporary labour migrants linked to public building works and large infrastructure development projects undertaken by large Chinese enterprises; small-time entrepreneurs; and transit migrants. The Migration Policy Institute identifies a fourth category of agricultural workers. The largest of these, is temporary labour migration. Of the 700–800 Chinese companies operating in 49 (out of 53) African countries,<sup>15</sup> most often hire some local labour, but they also rely heavily on Chinese migrant labour in their infrastructure, public works, oil, and mining operations. Ma Mung reports that there are approximately 80,000 Chinese workers employed by these Chinese firms.<sup>16</sup> Others report even higher numbers; for example, Legeay-Gillon claims that in 2007 there were approximately 130 000 Chinese working in Africa.<sup>17</sup> The use of Chinese contract labourers has become one of the most contentious issues in contemporary China-Africa relations, particularly in view of high levels of unemployment in many African countries. Chinese firms justify this practice on costs, cultural affinity, and productivity arguments.<sup>18</sup>

Most of these migrants stay for the duration of their contracts (typically one to three years) and return to China.<sup>19</sup> These labour migrants, I argue, can be further divided by profession: while the vast majority of temporary labour migrants are semi-skilled, there is also a smaller managerial and professional class of migrant employed in large construction projects as well as in the financial, telecommunications, and media sectors. While the vast majority of those from the less skilled category of worker tends to return to China, a larger proportion of the managers and professionals often remains in the African host country as independent migrants, often establishing themselves as small entrepreneurs. Table 2, compiled from information extracted from Ma Mung, lists various types of Chinese

investments in Africa; all of these large resource extraction and infrastructure projects would likely employ some combination of local and Chinese workers.

**Table 2: Chinese Investments in Africa**

Country	Resource Extraction	Infrastructure Project
Zambia, DRC	Cobalt & copper extraction	
Mozambique	Coal & oil infrastructure	Sports stadium
Zimbabwe	Coal & ferrochrome exploration	Roads, mobile telephone networks, production & distribution of electricity
Ethiopia	Drug manufacture, oil exploration	Construction of motorways, hydro-electric power station
Republic of Central Africa	Uranium and oil exploration	Cement factory, sports stadium
Gabon	Timber, manganese, niobium, iron, oil	National Assembly, Senate, City of Information, hospitals, Presidential Palace, railway & roads
Mali	Cotton treatment plant	Congressional Palace, roads
Sudan	Oil	Hydro-electric power plants, power stations, oil pipeline
Senegal		Health facilities, sports stadium, cultural infrastructure
Algeria	Petroleum refinery	Residential construction, extension of Algiers airport, dams, motorway

Source: Ma Mung, 'Chinese Migration and China's Foreign Policy' in *Journal of Chinese Overseas* 4 (1) May 2008: 96-97.

The second group of migrants are small-time entrepreneurs, traders, and small investors or what Carling and Haugen refer to as 'new entrepreneurial migration' where the emphasis is placed on 'migrant' rather than on 'entrepreneur'.<sup>20</sup> These migrants were not necessarily entrepreneurs in China, but upon migrating to Africa (and other parts of the globe) they establish their own businesses, commonly in retail or wholesale trade of Chinese-made goods, rather than entering the wage labour market. Reasons for this include lack of fluency in local languages, low capital required for start-up, as well as linkages to Chinese manufacturers.

Ma Mung reports that migration of small entrepreneurs involved in the export of Chinese products have resulted in the establishment of hundreds of Chinese shops in French, Italian and Spanish cities; in the Central European countries of Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Romania; and across Africa.<sup>21</sup> In addition to 'China shops' some Chinese migrants also run restaurants and Chinese traditional medicine clinics/outlets. The 'entrepreneurial migrants' term incorporates not only the 'entrepreneur' who initially sets up the business, but also workers in the business who often include relatives, family friends, or people from the same village/town in China. Often Chinese retailers and other businesses choose areas where their Taiwanese predecessors had established businesses. For example, in Mauritius, Nigeria, Namibia, Lesotho and South Africa Taiwanese factories and other businesses were established first, some as early as the 1970s.

In many African countries one might notice that 'China shops' are almost identical. They tend to sell a wide range of low-cost (and one might argue, low quality) China-made textiles, often to the lowest end of the consumer market. Items available at the typical

'China shop' will include leather and imitation leather goods (shoes, belts, handbags); clothing (men's, women's, and children's under and outerwear); scarves, shawls, hats and wigs; sports bags and luggage; bicycles, toys and other items for babies and small children (strollers, playpens, etc.); costume jewellery; mattresses, blankets, towels, rugs and linoleum flooring; and small household appliances and electronic goods. Sometimes these 'China shops' also sell locally-made products. For example, in Cape Verde, because of the popularity of Brazilian footwear and clothing, many China shops have also begun to import and sell Brazilian products. In South Africa, in response to a on-going campaign to buy locally, many 'China shops' also sell 'Proudly South African' products, including children's school shoes and blankets. Most of the Chinese products are sourced directly from manufacturers in China, thus reducing the number of intermediaries, the cost, and ultimately the selling price of the goods.

In addition to these retail China shops and businesses, several larger African cities have become home to Chinese wholesale traders. The largest of these are in Johannesburg; Casablanca is home to several hundred Chinese wholesalers; and Accra, Yaounde and Douala also host several Chinese wholesale markets. Johannesburg has almost a dozen of these large wholesale centres, each of which has several hundred wholesale shops or stalls; these include China City, China Mart, Asia City, Hong Kong City, Crowne Square, Gold Reef Emporia, Dragon City, African Trade Centre, and Orient City. These form a regional shopping hub which provides goods not just for South Africans but also to retailers and consumers neighbouring countries (Botswana, Lesotho, Zimbabwe, and Angola) and from across Africa.

Ma Mung points out that the growth of overseas Chinese enterprises in Africa actually creates a demand for labour (rather than the demand emanating from the general labour market in the host country) and thus encourages, via social and economic networks, further labour migration from China.<sup>22</sup> Carling and Haugen argue, however, that hiring other Chinese nationals has to do with trust rather than pure ethnicity; in other words, workers are recruited amongst relatives or family friends who are known and trusted, not because they are Chinese.<sup>23</sup> It is these kinship networks rather than broader transnational ethnic networks that form the basis of migration flows from particular regions of China to particular areas of Africa; for example, in the Free State province of South Africa, almost all of the new Chinese migrants are from the Fuqing region of Fujian province.<sup>24</sup>

The last two groups of Chinese migrants to Africa include farmers and in-transit migrants. In-transit migrants are most difficult to identify and document because of their informal status; they may enter on legal tourist or business visas and then overstay. In-transit migrants use Africa as a jumping off point for Europe or North America because of hardening immigration policies in these western countries. Some may be able to find work with other Chinese migrants while in Africa and some amongst these may eventually establish themselves legally in their African host countries.

According to the China-Africa Business Council several thousand Chinese farmers have recently migrated to Kenya, Uganda, Ghana and Senegal most from Hubei Province.<sup>25</sup> Sautman also reports that there are Chinese farmers in Zimbabwe, Zambia and South Africa.<sup>26</sup> Burski, in a recent paper, claims that there are currently over 50 agricultural villages in 28 African countries with a total of over 15 000 Chinese peasants now living in isolated, remote, rural areas of Africa.<sup>27</sup> There is ongoing research into agricultural migration in Zambia, but to date there has been no detailed published empirical work on

this newest group of Chinese migrants to Africa. Given the current global food crisis it would be well worth monitoring this segment of Chinese migration to Africa.

Finally, in addition to these groups of migrants, there are also Chinese diplomats in most African countries, increasing numbers of Chinese journalists, as well as several thousand Chinese students attending tertiary institutions in Africa, mostly in South Africa.<sup>28</sup> These groups, like Chinese contract workers, typically leave Africa at the conclusion of their contract periods or, in the case of the students, when they finish their degree programmes.

## SETTLEMENT PATTERNS

Discussions of Chinese migrants in Africa must address the issue of whether or not temporary migrants will eventually settle in their African host countries. The largest portion of the various types of migrants discussed in the above section, whether on contract to large Chinese-run construction projects, employed as managers with Chinese SOEs, or with the Chinese diplomatic services, will eventually return to China. Amongst the independent 'entrepreneurial migrants' it is still uncertain as to their longer-term intentions. Such decisions are often based on the success of their business ventures and related to the reception they receive in their host country. I would argue that most Chinese in Africa cannot, as yet, be defined as settlers (with the exception of some Chinese in South Africa); rather, they fit in one of two categories: modern-day sojourners or transnational citizens. The difference between these two categories, to some extent, is not only one of class, but also of intention.

The modern-day sojourners want to make a profit in Africa and return, successful, to their home villages and towns. One Chinese ambassador to a large African country argued that most of the Chinese migrants to Africa had one dream: that was to return home to build a three-level home or 'monument' to their success overseas. To them, hardships of life in Africa are worthwhile and surmountable because they are seen as temporary. He explained that there is a cultural value placed on suffering for the longer-term goals; without hardship, there is no gain. He argued that the value of delayed gratification is a part of the Chinese philosophy and mentality; there is a firm belief that if you focus, if you work hard, and if you live frugally, you can succeed.

Africa provides great opportunities if migrants are willing to assume the risks involved in migrating, temporarily, to places so far and so different from home. Even for the migrant worker, three years on an overseas contract may provide enough capital to finance the construction of a new home whereas it might take ten years or longer to do the same on the wages he might earn if he stayed at home. Put another way, wages in Africa can be 30–400% higher than in China.<sup>29</sup> Amongst the entrepreneurial migrants, even a modest return on initial investments can afford continued travel between Africa and China. Often young men who have spent a few years in Africa will go to China to find wives. Many young people send their Africa-born children back to China to be raised by grandparents or other family members so that they can attend Chinese schools and learn to 'be Chinese'. They have invested in businesses, but often live modestly, even frugally, still uncertain about longer-term decisions about 'home'. One indicator of this transitory, 'limbo', or sojourner life is that many of these entrepreneurs continue to live in spaces carved out at

the backs of (or upstairs from) their business premises or in rental properties.

The transnational overseas Chinese operates in a more cosmopolitan, globalised world. He can make investments in one or more African cities or countries; maintain business interests in manufacturing in China and wholesale outlets in several African countries; travel to and fro several times a year; educate his children in good, private, schools of his/her choosing; and keep at least two or three homes in several different countries. There are a small number of such transnational Chinese operating in various African countries.

Those who have now been in Africa for ten years or more, I would argue, fall into a different category. Together with the next generation of African-born Chinese these Chinese have, indeed, become settlers. They often have split and blended identities. In South Africa, for example, we witness the children of Taiwanese and Chinese migrants born and/or raised in South Africa asserting their South Africanness; they do not know China (or Taiwan) as home. They are South Africans not only by birth or naturalization, but also in terms of how they view themselves. They own property in South Africa. However, in terms of the overall numbers of Chinese in Africa, these Chinese 'settlers' probably number less than 20 000 and are predominantly based in southern Africa.

## RELATIONS WITH AFRICA HOST COMMUNITIES

Alden writes that 'For many Africans, the relatively sudden appearance of Chinese settlers in their midst is certainly puzzling, especially in light of their lower level of skills and their apparently limited financial means.'<sup>30</sup> In the majority of African countries, accustomed, perhaps, only to wealthy Western foreigners, the Chinese are, indeed, conspicuously different. However, many African nations, for many years, have also played host to large numbers of foreigners in their midst: Lebanese in west Africa, Indians in southern and east Africa, and the French in north Africa. Are the reactions to the Chinese more intense? Or are they simply the newest in a procession of 'others' in their lands? There are a number of factors that influence host country attitudes and perceptions of Chinese migrants.

Certainly the impact of the media, particularly negative western media portrayals of China, China's activities of the African continent as 'predatory' and 'neo-colonial' as well as usage of terms such as 'invasion' play a large role in influencing local attitudes and behaviours toward Chinese people on the continent. State relations with China also play a role. While bi-lateral state relations might be good, depending on the socio-economic conditions of the particular country as well as local politics, China's close ties to a particular African government might be viewed negatively by the political opposition and its citizens, as in Zimbabwe or Sudan. These negative views then impact the perceptions of local populations of the Chinese migrants, who are often viewed as agents of the Chinese state. For example, rebel forces in Ethiopia and Sudan have expressed anti-China views, based on the links between China and the national regimes that the rebels oppose.<sup>31</sup>

To further complicate matters, many Chinese contract workers live in compounds, isolated from their host communities. Their isolation and the closed-nature of these compounds together with the long hours often worked by contract labourers also lead to rumours, many of them completely unfounded. For example, many African countries have rumours that China is using slave or prison labour on their large construction projects. One researcher explains:

The Chinese are a mysterious presence in Angola. Everyone seems to know about them and their assorted projects, but few people have actually seen them, and scarcely anyone can claim to have talked to them. The Chinese rarely venture beyond the encampments in which they live and work. This isolation has bred fabulous rumours; several Angolans state with certainty that the labourers have been released from prison to work off their sentences. Angola is a country that virtually falls into a coma on the weekend; locals refused to believe that a free man could work as hard as the Chinese do, and for so little money.<sup>32</sup>

So, numerous rumour mills contend that millions of Chinese ‘unemployed and prisoners’ are shipped to Africa and forced to work in construction and mining. How else might a local community explain how these isolated groups of Chinese workers carry on working 10–12 hour–days, often 6½ or 7 days a week, endlessly?

Myths also persist to explain Chinese business successes. For example, on-going rumours that the Chinese state provide low-interest loans and other subsidies to Chinese migrants or that all these independent entrepreneurial migrants are somehow connected to the Chinese SOEs, neither of which is true, persist in part because local communities can not understand the motivations of the Chinese migrants or explain their successes.

Increased anti-Chinese sentiment in some African countries may have to do with a Chinese saying: ‘One Chinese is a dragon, many Chinese are bugs’.<sup>33</sup> As numbers of Chinese and numbers of China shops increase, there is increased competition and saturation of certain markets. Local businesses often cannot compete with ‘China shops’ due to their ties to Chinese manufacturers. Large numbers of Chinese, in competition with local businesses and with one another, tends to lead to increased anti-Chinese sentiment, increases in both petty crime and more violent crimes against Chinese, and increased corruption and extortion, especially as larger numbers of successful Chinese become flashy with their money, and particularly in circumstances where the majority of the host community remain unemployed or underemployed.

Sautman also argues that most Chinese in Africa generally live more like their African counterparts than like Western expatriates. He says, ‘They are paid much less and live more frugally than Western expats doing comparable work... Chinese ‘workers’ (i.e. managers, engineers and skilled craftsmen) for one construction firm in Angola receive some \$500 a month, live two to three to a room, and cook for themselves, while Europeans rent a house and eat out.’<sup>34</sup> The increased proximity, both physical and economic, can also make the Chinese easier targets for extortion, petty crimes and xenophobic violence under certain circumstances.

In addition to African traders who compete with ‘China shops’, workers employed by Chinese companies and labour unions that represent them form another group which is often highly critical of the Chinese. Chinese employers, in various sectors, have been criticised for poor labour practices and low wages. A recent research trip to Namibia revealed that while Chinese employers in the construction sector have, in fact, side-stepped several local laws (labour, tax, employment equity), it was also evident that Chinese were being singled out for criticism. For example, according to Namibian government officials fewer than 20% of all companies registered in Namibia had complied with the national employment equity regulations, and yet it was only the Chinese who were singled out for criticism for their extra-legal practices.

Anti-China and anti-Chinese sentiment is found in west and east Africa as well, but China-related political tensions appears to be most acute in southern Africa. Oppositions in the region are more developed and more likely to engage in nationalised, rather than tribalised, forms of ethnic mobilisation; that is to criticise foreigners rather than co-national ethnic groups.

To the extent that anti-China and anti-Chinese sentiment has been prominently manifested, it does not appear to be spontaneous, but rather the result of mobilisation by political forces that oppose or are highly critical of ruling parties. Southern African opposition parties and movements have mobilised against China as a 'new colonialist' and have accused Chinese of being exploiters who degrade local economies.<sup>35</sup> They have sought to halt or limit the influx of China-made goods and Chinese migrants. Of even greater concern, Zambia in 2006 and Lesotho in 2007 saw outbreaks of anti-Chinese violence.<sup>36</sup> While there are numerous instances of increasing anti-Chinese sentiment, we cannot assume that all African countries are such poor hosts to Chinese migrants. Certainly it is difficult to make any sweeping statements about the reception and treatment of Chinese in all 53 African nations or about all communities within countries. Surveys and on-the-spot observation in a few countries indicate that, apart from those individuals who compete with or work for Chinese, many Africans admire China and the Chinese for their economic contributions and hard-working style.<sup>37</sup> For example, a recent study found that in Zambia, with the exception of the Copperbelt, where the Chinese have a particularly bad reputation associated with the working conditions at the Chinese-operated mine, the overwhelming majority of people interviewed have very favorable perceptions of China, simply because they can now buy a broader range of affordable consumer goods.<sup>38</sup>

Similarly, preliminary analysis of a small survey carried out amongst students and faculty at the University of Johannesburg seems to indicate that most respondents hold a rather balanced view of the Chinese and find much to admire about them.

Longer-term economic impact of Chinese migrant activities has yet to be measured, but in terms of attitudes and perceptions of Chinese, Africans have mixed views, with good reason. Sautman writes: 'Inexpensive Chinese-made household goods and textiles brought into Africa by both Chinese and Africans may inhibit African light industry formation and thus harm a section of the poor as potential producers';<sup>39</sup> however, electronic equipment, clothing, and other Chinese products because they are much cheaper than Western imports and local products also benefits wider sections of these same communities as consumers. In Cape Verde Chinese business migrants have brought about an increase in purchasing power of Cape Verdeans due to the lower prices of their imported goods. Local landlords, too, have profited greatly from a steep increase in rents. Simultaneously, however, local retailers see profits dwindle and have been driven out of business, unable to compete with Chinese retailers. Thus, as Carling and Haugen report: 'The gains and losses connected with the survey of the baihuo (Chinese) businesses in Cape Verde are unevenly distributed among the Chinese as well as the Cape Verdeans.'<sup>40</sup>

There are also, increasingly, more and more anecdotes about social contact between Chinese and Africans throughout the continent: cordial work relations, friendships, bi-racial romantic relations, and even increasing numbers of bi-racial children. These are, albeit, new and few and require further study.

## CHINESE IN SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa, as the only country on the African continent with an existing South African-born community of Chinese<sup>41</sup> as well as the largest population of Chinese on the continent is worth separate consideration as it illustrates various waves of different types of Chinese migration. Further, it might provide some indication of where and how the Chinese fit in an African nation. South Africa is home to three distinct communities of Chinese: the Chinese South Africans or indigenous Chinese, Taiwanese and Taiwanese South Africans, and new Chinese immigrants from the PRC. The Chinese South African community of approximately 10 000 is made up of 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 4<sup>th</sup> generation South Africans whose ancestors began arriving from China in the late 1870s. The Taiwanese and Taiwanese South African community, established in the late 1970s and 1980s is about 6 000 strong. And the newest and by far the largest community of Chinese began arriving from mainland China in the mid- to late-1990s; estimates of this community range from 200 000 to over 350 000.

The ancestors of the Chinese South Africans arrived in the country as early as 1870, although most came at around the turn of the century. They came in small numbers, as independent migrants, initially lured by the idea that they might make their fortunes in gold mining. What they encountered, however, was racism and discrimination: if you were not 'European' you were not permitted digging licenses. These first insults were followed by a litany of laws prohibiting non-whites, and sometimes specifically 'Asiatics', from trading and residing freely.

The Chinese South African community remained small, their growth limited by immigration restrictions. They continued to suffer under a myriad of discriminatory laws, just like all other 'non-whites' in South Africa during first half of the 20th century and throughout most of the apartheid years. From the late 1950s and 1960s, and particularly during the 1970s, however, growing social acceptance by white South Africans created just enough of an opening for Chinese to start sending their children to private white schools and gradually move into white areas, always on a permit basis. Today the Chinese South African community is largely middle class and professional, having negotiated, studied, and worked their way into a hard-won respectability. This small community also recently won a long and hard-fought battle to have their previous disadvantage recognised in a very public court decision around their exclusion from affirmative action. Unfortunately, negative public reaction to the court decision continues to hamper their sense of belonging in South Africa.

Their identity as respectable South African citizens of Chinese heritage has, however, come under pressure by the growing numbers of new Chinese immigrants. Most media coverage of the Chinese in the past decade has been negative, focused on hawking, overfishing, abalone and rhino horn smuggling, drugs, human trafficking, gun-running and Chinese-on-Chinese crimes. Taiwanese and Chinese triads, no doubt, migrated to South Africa together with more law abiding members Chinese, but these groups are little researched for obvious reasons. In fact, the word 'triad' seldom makes an appearance on the pages of South African news.<sup>42</sup> Rumours, however, abound. Rumours of contract killings, of protection monies extracted from Chinese businesses, and of intimidation and hit lists. Even the more seemingly benign coverage of Chinese businesses in Cyrildene<sup>43</sup> show images of Chinese men squatting outside their restaurants in undershirts and slops — not a very respectable image. The problem with most of these articles and images is that



they conflate all Chinese into one group, when, in fact, there are several.

Most of the Taiwanese here arrived during the apartheid years, when the apartheid government offered generous subsidies and incentives to foreign businesses willing to open up industries in and around the former homelands. Most of those that arrived during the 1980s were industrialists and businessmen or senior managers; they settled in rural or semi-rural areas, many opening up textile factories. These were followed by independent Taiwanese immigrants, small businesspeople and students who settled in the cities, mostly in and around Johannesburg, Pretoria, and Cape Town. At their height, there were a reported 30 000 Taiwanese in South Africa. Because of dual citizenship allowances in Taiwan, many applied for and received South African citizenship.

Then, from the late 1990s, as subsidies expired, South Africa transferred their official recognition from the Republic of China (Taiwan) to the People's Republic of China (PRC), labour problems increased, and, perhaps most importantly, they faced increased competition from inexpensive Chinese imports, more than 20 000 of the Taiwanese left South Africa. The remaining 6 000 Taiwanese, most South African citizens, have now been around for almost two decades. Some of their children were born here; many other young Taiwanese know no other home. They too, like the Chinese South Africans, have committed themselves to staying here and contributing to South Africa's development.

The newest waves of Chinese migration are primarily from the PRC. Starting in the late 1980s and picking up pace in the period leading up to South Africa's recognition of the PRC January 1998, significant numbers of both legal and illegal immigrants have entered South Africa from mainland China, dwarfing the existing South African-born Chinese community and the Taiwanese. These numbers have increased even more dramatically in the past five to seven years. In terms of this third wave of immigration, mostly from mainland China, researcher Anna Ying Chen identifies three distinct periods: the first from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s; a second from the mid- to late 1990s; and a third – larger and ongoing – wave which began in the early 2000s.<sup>44</sup>

The earliest of these new Chinese immigrants from mainland China arrived in South Africa in the late 1980s. Many landed in South Africa between 1989 and 1992. We speculate that many of these immigrants arrived along two primary routes: the first group arrived via Lesotho and the second via Hungary<sup>45</sup> through the Ivory Coast. The majority of this group came to South Africa with little and started up small businesses. Those that came via Lesotho initially began as employees for Taiwanese businesses. After years of hard work, by late 1990s, many of these earliest immigrants from mainland China became quite successful, owning established and profitable business, mostly as importers and wholesalers of Chinese products and as owners of their own factories. However, like many of the early Taiwanese industrialists, as many as half of these earliest Chinese immigrants have recently left South Africa due to security and other family concerns; some have returned to China<sup>46</sup> while others have remigrated to the Canada, Australia, and other developed Western countries.

The second inflow of mainland Chinese into South Africa took place in the mid- to late 1990s, in the period immediately following the first democratic elections and as South Africa ended its relationship with Taiwan and established diplomatic relationship with the PRC. These early Chinese businesses, some state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and others private, typically sent between two to ten Chinese nationals to staff their operations. At the end of their two- to three-year contract periods, some of these Chinese employees

– from across China – decided to stay on in South Africa. Those who chose to remain were largely well-educated professionals, many with international work experience and capital. They have since established extensive business networks in Southern Africa and in China. Many have expanded beyond their initial trading businesses into other industrial fields, including mining, manufacturing, and property development.

Others in this second cohort hail from Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces, two of the most affluent regions in China which benefited from the Chinese open door economic policy. Entrepreneurs from these regions identified the business opportunities in Africa and saw South Africa as their entry point to other neighbouring African countries. They came with both capital and other business resources. Most of these immigrants are linked by both family and other close social networks to factories in China. With these resources and competitive advantages, their first business choice is import, wholesale, and distribution. Some of the mainland Chinese of this second cohort have also moved on to other countries in southern Africa, again, usually as wholesalers/distributors of Chinese imports.<sup>47</sup>

The last and ongoing wave of Chinese immigrants began arriving in South Africa in the new millennium. They are made up of small traders and peasants<sup>48</sup> primarily from Fujian province. Many entered the country illegally via neighbouring countries; due to their limited English, limited education, and less extensive business networks, they tend to run small shops in the remote towns all across South Africa. This last group, whose numbers continue to increase, makes up the largest proportion of Chinese migrants in South Africa.

Three distinct groups of Chinese in South Africa, with further divisions and distinctions of class, culture, language, and region of origin amongst them, are viewed by most other South Africans as one and the same. Most recently, this inability to distinguish between groups of Chinese and the stereotypes that have emerged have affected the Chinese in South Africa negatively. The negative reaction to the recent July court ruling about Chinese South Africans and affirmative action policies and increasing numbers of Chinese being targeted by criminals and corrupt officials are just two examples. Recent research reveals that most of these newer immigrants, who contribute in various ways to local South African economies, would like to stay in the country; however, if crime and corruption get worse, many Chinese (including those who carry South African identity documents) will likely pack up their investments, their skills, and their suitcases, for safer environs.

## CONCLUSION

Despite huge risks and challenges increasing numbers of Chinese migrant are choosing to cover long distances for various African destinations. Potential short- and medium-term financial gains appear to outweigh very real dangers and difficulties. Sending areas within China, types of migrant, migration patterns, and migration paths are increasingly diverse.

Longer-term social and economic impacts of these Chinese migrants on Africa have yet to be measured. Whether or not some number of the new Chinese migrants remains in their African host countries depends largely on broader issues of China's Africa policies, state-to-state negotiations, as well as social, economic and political climates in particular African nations. Policies around migration in general and toward Chinese in particular, the media, and largely negative Western views about China's activities on the African continent

also influence the reception and treatment of Chinese in different parts of Africa.

Differences of language, culture, and values can be stumbling blocks to greater integration of Chinese migrants; but in some countries, Chinese seem to have adapted to local circumstances learned local languages and adopted local customs. These adaptive strategies combined with hard work might help them overcome local barriers to economic and social success. But even in the best of circumstances, if Chinese do find economic success, South Africa's example seems to indicate that they will continue to occupy the in-between spaces, wedged between a majority of impoverished local Africans and a narrow elite, be they white or black. However, if trends toward increasing anti-China and anti-Chinese sentiments continue, Chinese migrants have good reason to hedge their bets before making longer-term commitments in Africa.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 The Chinese in Africa/Africans in China (CA/AC) Research Working Group was established in 2007, is hosted at the Centre for Sociological Research at the University of Johannesburg, and serves as a umbrella for ten research projects focused on Chinese in a dozen African countries as well as Africans in China.
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- 7 This table is used here courtesy of Barry Sautman, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, who collected the information over the past two years.
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- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 99.
- 13 Carling J & H Haugen, *op. cit.*, p. 13.
- 14 Politzer M, *op. cit.*, p. 4.
- 15 Sautman B, *op. cit.*, p. 8. See also Carling J, Haugen H & M Politzer, *op. cit.*
- 16 Ma Mung, *op. cit.*, pp. 93–94.
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- 18 Alden C, *China in Africa*. Cape Town and London: Zed Books, 2007, p. 46.
- 19 Politzer M, *op. cit.*, p. 4.
- 20 Carling J & H Haugen, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

- 21 Ma Mung, *op. cit.*, p. 93.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 101.
- 23 Carling J & H Haugen, *op. cit.*, p. 7.
- 24 Park YJ & AY Chen, 'Race, Class and Power: Chinese in the Free State', unpublished paper presented at the South African Sociological Association conference, Stellenbosch, July 2008.
- 25 Politzer M, *op. cit.*, p. 4.
- 26 Sautman B, *op. cit.*, p. 30.
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- 44 Park YJ & AY Chen, 'Intersections of race, class and power: Chinese in post-apartheid Free State', unpublished paper presented at the South African Sociological Association Congress, Stellenbosch, July 2008.
- 45 At the time, because Hungary was also a communist nation, Chinese citizens did not need visas to enter. Upon discovering that there were limited business opportunities there, they moved on to look for other opportunities. Africa was one of the obvious choices, again due to the porous borders of many African nations.
- 46 While many of these earliest Chinese immigrants left South Africa, quite a few of them maintain business linkages to the country. Some have left their South African business interests in the hands of newer Chinese immigrants. Others have set up related businesses, such as factories, in China.
- 47 See Dobler G, 'South-South business relations in practice: Chinese merchants in Oshikango, Namibia', unpublished paper on Chinese wholesale merchants engaged in cross-border trade in Oshikango, Namibia, 2005.
- 48 In the early 1980s part of economic reforms in China allowed families to occupy and farm a piece of land; however the land is still owned by the government. Each village has rights to some portion of land; this land is then divided equally amongst the families that live in the village. The individual families farm the land and then sell some portion of their produce back to the government, after taking a small share for themselves. These are not farmers in the commercial sense; rather the Chinese 'peasants' are similar to sharecroppers, with the Chinese state as the landowners.



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