Out of China, Into Africa

Howard W. French
China's Second Continent: How a Million Migrants Are Building a New Empire in Africa
By Howard W. French
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Reviewed by Nayan Chanda

WHEN IN 1492 the Genoese sailor Christopher Columbus stumbled upon a Caribbean island, Europe was said to have won the equivalent of a second continent. Over the following three centuries, Europeans colonized the vast expanses of North and South America, eliminating through disease and war many of the original inhabitants and filling the ranks of labor with slaves from another continent. The Americas absorbed Europe's surplus population, supplied food and raw materials for its industrial and urban centers and markets for its manufactured products.

China could possibly have followed a similar path when Ming Dynasty Admiral Zheng He sailed into east Africa nearly a century earlier than the voyage of Columbus. But the admiral and his 60-strong fleet had a different mission — reconnaissance and a show of force. Rather than encourage colonization of a distant continent, the imperial China of that time forbade its citizens to travel abroad. Some shipwrecked Chinese sailors, however, did linger in Africa and nimbly avoided the practice of sub-Saharan Africa. Colorful accounts of his interviews not only provide a lively portrait of the Chinese diaspora in Africa, but also offer a new perspective on Chinese society and economy through the eyes of those who choose to make Africa their new home.

By conservative estimates, Africa now counts over a million Chinese residents. Their diverse activities — including mining, logging, petty trading and massive construction projects — have been helping to shape Africa, in the process providing China with fuel for its industrialization and wealth for its ambitious march to become the world's leading superpower. China has adopted a modern-day barter system that brings access to Africa's oil, gas, mining, forestry and vast agricultural resources in exchange for the construction of roads, railways and public buildings. Today, 20 percent of China's oil imports, about 90 percent of its cobalt, 35 percent of its manganese and 30 percent of its tantalum — all key inputs for high-tech manufacturing — come from Africa. From $10 billion in 2000, China's two-way trade with Africa soared to $170 billion in 2013. In the first decade of this century, China has committed an estimated $74 billion in state and private funds to Africa — far more than the World Bank.

French takes the reader across major countries of sub-Saharan Africa to meet a wide variety of Chinese entrepreneurs, traders, doctors, street vendors, poultry farmers and even prostitutes. His attempt to find out what brought them to Africa, their many ways of making money, their relationship with Africans and how they see the government in Beijing yields fascinating insights.

Anecdotes involving Chinese-African interaction and vignettes of the lives of Chinese migrants, interspersed with his own caustic observations, offer a rich tapestry of a massive transformation that has happened largely under the radar of the rest of the world. China's role in Africa makes the news only when there is a geopolitical clash with the West in countries such as Sudan or Zimbabwe.

SEIZING OPPORTUNITY

Former President Jiang Zemin's 1996 tour of six African countries and a speech on his return to China calling on businesses to "go out" to Africa as a priority zone for expansion was the beginning of China's official opening to Africa, which culminated with a 2002 summit of 53 African leaders and vignettes of the lives of Chinese migrants, including that of religion and speech. While not averse to seeking help from Chinese embassies in Africa, the migrants are very much on their own.

A common theme that emerges from French’s interviews with these Chinese migrants is that most lacked opportunity at home and resented omnipresent corruption, pollution and lack of freedom, including that of religion and speech.

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if they’ve had lots of children, well what do the children become? Are they Chinese or Mozambicans?” Proud of his ingenious plan of “sexual colonization,” Hao informs French with a hearty laugh that his elder son already has a live-in girlfriend. The important thing, he says, is to have children, lots of children. “That way we’ll have people who can serve in each and every occupation we need … There will be nothing we can’t do.” While Hao’s case may be more colorful than most, French says he has met many Chinese people in Africa who broadly resemble Hao.

In Zambia, he meets Yang Bohe, a self-taught member of China’s Lost Generation — those who missed school in their youth because of the Cultural Revolution — who runs a large copper processing plant. Yang arrived in Africa in 2002 as an employee of one of China’s large construction companies. He was impressed by the abundance of copper ore in the country and ended up setting up a rudimentary copper smelter in collaboration with an Australian businessman of Chinese origin. From $2,800 a ton in 2000, the price of copper climbed to $9,000 a ton by 2007 — and so did the fortunes of Yang, who earned millions of dollars supplying copper ingots to the global market. Yang avoids fraternizing with other Chinese who come knocking at his door. “We are an Australian company,” he tells inquiring tax inspectors and policemen.

In the rundown capital of Senegal, French encounters Chen Rui, the 26-year-old mamsan of Dynasty Bar. Eight years ago, she landed in Africa to help run a bar in Dakar. She now operates her own entertainment establishment, mainly for Chinese customers. She is unhappy with the poor economy, but has managed to bring her brother over to study French at Dakar University so that he can do business in Africa.

In Mozambique, French meets a Chinese woman from Shantou who has picked up some Portuguese and is living alone in a hamlet selling food supplied by itinerant fellow Fujian traders. Why did she leave China? “I had to make a living,” was her short answer. Thousands of petty traders that one encounters in all parts of Africa, selling $5 cellphones and plastic bric-a-brac, will have a similar answer. They nevertheless constitute a minority. Most of the Chinese migrants in Africa are laborers staying on after the end of their contract with big public works companies. China claims to have built 42 stadiums and 54 hospitals in Africa, not to speak of mining, road and railway construction projects, each involving the import of thousands of Chinese workers. Staying on with a different visa status is possible because of China’s clout with the countries in which it has invested. One of the unwritten conditions of many official deals with African countries is that the government should be lenient in granting visas to Chinese citizens. There are many who have received the government’s help and encouragement to settle in different parts of the world to do business.

In a stereotypical comment one hears all over Africa, French quotes an African worker for a non-governmental organization complaining that “the Chinese bring all their own workers, and the few Guineans are reduced to the role of task boys. In one case we had here, a Chinese company was hired to build a bridge and they did most of their work at night, and they wouldn’t let anyone onto their site. Between the groundbreaking and inauguration ceremonies they give out no information at all, nothing.”

In a typical deal, China signed a $6 billion resource-for-infrastructure agreement with Congo under which China would build railway lines, roads, housing, hospitals and a new university in exchange for a guaranteed supply of copper and cobalt for 20 years. Often the buildings and roads built by the Chinese companies that win contracts by virtue of having the lowest bids soon begin falling apart because of the shoddy material used; the same is true of cheap consumer goods sold by Chinese vendors. In many African capitals, Chinese vendors have taken over the retail sector, often in violation of local law. The import of cheap goods helps the poor consumer, but stunts the growth of domestic industry, which is unable to match the “China price.” Government protection of Chinese investment is an ongoing problem, although working conditions in hazardous conditions and are unable to use their trade union rights to fight for higher wages or safe working environments.

WHAT NEXT?

French wonders how Africa will cope when, by mid-century, two emerging trends will meet: the first is that Africa’s population will double to two billion, and the second is that much of Africa’s known reserves of oil, iron, bauxite, copper, cobalt, uranium and gold will be largely depleted. Africa is said to possess 60 percent of the world’s uncultivated arable land. China, in contrast, has 20 percent of the world’s population and 9 percent of its farmland. China’s expertise and management skill could well be used to turn Africa into a new granary for the world. But how would Africans view prosperous islands of Chinese farming in the midst of a teeming, impoverished local population?

In the book’s epilogue, French observes how the Chinese role in Africa resembles traditional interpretations of imperialism. “China, for all its generosity and solicitude,” but allows it to solidly entrench itself in the world’s fastest-growing economy and build a base for further expansion.

Despite their rapid growth in the past decade, China’s migrants in Africa are still a small number in historical terms. In the second half of the 19th century alone, 60 million Europeans settled in the Americas. Those who left Europe also went for good, with a clear idea of making a new life. Things are more fluid today. Thanks to ease of travel, communications and transfer of money, the tide of migration picks up fast, but can also be reversed equally rapidly. The anger in Africa that the Chinese presence and practices are creating combined with a growing population and depletion of resources may not bode well for China’s long-term future in Africa.

French’s otherwise admirable book suffers from some gaps that are perhaps inevitable in writing about such a vast continent. He covers 15 of the 58 countries in Africa, but omits some of the key countries with significant Chinese involvement. For example, South Africa is left out, although China’s trading partners in Africa, totaling $20 billion. Also missing is Sudan, which counts China as its largest economic partner, exporting 40 percent of its oil and receiving in exchange weapons that are embargoed by the United Nations. The red-carpet treatment that Beijing reserved during a visit in June 2011 by Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir, who is wanted by the International Criminal Court on charges of genocide in Darfur, is emblematic of the realpolitik that guides Chinese foreign policy.

Such omissions notwithstanding, French’s trenchant but fair and engaging book is a pioneering contribution to understanding the significance of Africa to China’s emergence on the global scene.