

SECTION 2
INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

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CHINA IN AFRICA: AFTER THE
GUN AND THE BIBLE...A WEST
AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

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Not since Senegal's independence in April 1960 has a major neighbourhood of its capital, Dakar, gone through such drastic transformations. No one who walks down the Allée du Centenaire fails to be amazed at the extent to which this thoroughfare has suddenly come to be teeming with people. Renamed Boulevard Général De Gaulle a few years ago in homage to one of the heroes of France, the former colonial power, today the Allée du Centenaire could ironically be dubbed *Boulevard Mao*. China has taken over the place and everything here now brings to mind the Great Helmsman who led the 1949 Communist triumph in China. In this city district hitherto known for its quietness, things changed overnight when Chinese men and women, as discreet as they were efficient, arrived just recently, in less than two decades. Pushing out the locals, they did

not hesitate to rent most of the real estate in the neighbourhood at above-market prices. They quickly turned it into one of the many tropical Chinatowns that have multiplied recently throughout the African continent.¹

This amounted to a slap in the face of traditional diplomacy in the case of Senegal. On the face of it, the presence in its capital of what one can term the 'Dakarais' Chinese contradicted the state of relations between the People's Republic of China and this West African state. The Senegalese government then led by President Abdou Diouf, tacitly supported by opposition parties (especially by the future President Abdoulaye Wade), decided to recognize Taiwan in January 1996. This decision had triggered the severance of relations with the PRC as Beijing's one-China policy was absolutely immovable.

At an early stage, very few African observers accurately gauged the true extent of Chinese migratory flows into Africa which started in the early 1990s. Such trends were themselves a consequence of the easing of restrictions on the movement of people out of their country that the Chinese traders were among the first to exploit. As a result, in Senegal and elsewhere in Africa where Taiwan had made diplomatic inroads, no one is surprised that Chinese from the PRC have come to reside in the same locations where the Taiwanese should have come to consolidate the basis of a still fragile relationship between their rebel island and several states across the African continent, where its diplomatic activism yielded important results.

Underestimated, even neglected, the Chinese 'quasi-diplomats' had an easy time pushing their agenda. They quickly turned numerous residential neighbourhoods in Africa into commercial areas. Not content with having bypassed the diplomatic obstacles, the Chinese of Dakar and those established elsewhere rapidly obtained their most precious goal: popular legitimacy. They took no time to gain the support of the poorest segments of the population. In the Senegalese capital, these did not take long to flow in the direction of the small retail outlets that flourish on both sides of the virtual *Boulevard Mao*.

1 See Adama Gaye, *Chine-Afrique: Le dragon et l'autruche* (Paris: Editions L'Harmattan, 2006) for a more indepth treatment.

Everything is available there: glittering ornaments, clothes for children and adults, gadgets, belts, scarves, handbags or shoes, and all sold at unit prices that defy all potential competition. By selling their wares at package prices between CFA francs 300 and 2000 (that is, a maximum of €6) the Chinese merchants guarantee the elimination of rivals. They give no chance to their local competitors, be they Senegalese or Lebanese. Besides dethroning them, the Chinese also outdid their rivals in the battle for public opinion: protests, strikes, and demonstrations of hostility against Chinese traders have thus far proved useless. This is because the bulk of the Senegalese population has consistently raised its voice to demand that the detractors 'allow the Chinese to continue to *work*'. Even the powerful National Union of Senegalese of Traders and Operators could not successfully impose the 'national preference' it sought against the Chinese influx. The Union was simply overtaken by the turn of events.

Taken aback by the hostility of other Senegalese, many of whom did not hesitate to call their manoeuvres xenophobic or even racist, the Senegalese traders and those of Lebanese origin had little choice but to buy from the new masters of local commerce and, if need be, to go and resell the same products elsewhere in Dakar or in the interior of the country. Some go even further. They come from neighbouring countries such as The Gambia, Guinea-Bissau and Mali with the idea that they no longer have to invest in long trips to Asia to seek out the merchandise now made available to them at their doorstep. They no longer have to confront the challenges of having to scramble to obtain a travel visa or plane tickets to acquire Chinese manufactured goods.

However, the presence of the Chinese in Dakar, as elsewhere on the continent, goes well beyond the simple anecdotal dimension. It represents the rapid growth of a Chinese diaspora that was previously negligible and mainly to be found in South Africa and Madagascar. What is the size of this population now? It is difficult to say with any accuracy. They numbered around 150,000 in 2004 and their number is likely to continue growing fast; a recent figure is 750,000.² In the

2 Howard French and Lydia Polgreen, 'Entrepreneurs from China flourish in Africa', 18 August 2007.

next five years, the number of these Chinese expatriates could double or even treble, even discounting the fact that the original estimates may be well below the real figures.³ Whatever the case may be, this massive emigration of a Chinese labour force shows a political will that deserves deeper analysis, particularly in terms of the massive shake-up it presages. These men and women that one finds in the many corners of the continent are, perhaps, the new colonizers of Africa.

Even though the neo-colonial reference brings strong response from Chinese officials and scholars, the risk of domination of Africa by the rising Asian power cannot be dismissed outright as the relationship seems to be unilaterally driven by China and geared toward its own interests. This threat and many other legitimate questions hover around China's presence in Africa. Without doubt, the Chinese expatriates' show of resourcefulness brings to mind some of these questions: how did they manage to settle so easily in Senegal and in the rest of Africa? Are they part of a national project masterminded by China which could be reminiscent of an imperial drive? Why do they make such an effort to buy all the hard currency they can get their hands on, often at exchange rates that are far higher than those practiced by local banks? To what extent will the normalization of the African informal sector be put at risk by the unwillingness of Chinese traders to fulfil their fiscal obligations? What will happen if African-registered but Chinese-owned companies become the main source of taxes in the countries where they are based? Will they not use this financial clout as a blackmailing device or, at least, a source of undue influence over host states? Whatever happens, there is little doubt that the new Chinese presence will change the face of the continent.

Divergent African views

Various reactions are generated by the Chinese presence in Africa. The more optimistic are glad that they have come and perceive them first and foremost as potential investors in a continent starved of capital and which can only benefit from the technology and expertise

3 Pierre-Antoine Braud, 'La Chine en Afrique: Anatomie d'une nouvelle strategie chinoise', Institute for Strategic Studies-EU Analysis, October 2005.

they bring along. At the other end of the spectrum, however, there are those who do not mince their words to describe what they see as a dangerous phenomenon. 'We have to contain the Chinese, it is a life-or-death issue for our continent', states the fiery director of a West African democracy-promoting NGO.⁴

This feeling is shared by diverse sectors of African society. 'Africa gains nothing from the Chinese; there is no quid pro quo with them. Europe can at least sell their Airbus planes to the Chinese in order to recoup some of the damages that they bring about to other industrial sectors like textiles and manufacturing,' argues the President of the Chamber of Commerce of an African capital. 'I have not seen a single Chinese investment project that is productive in any way; they are content with building infrastructure, especially stadiums and congress halls to get Africans states to recognize the PRC.'⁵ His views are corroborated by a West African banker, according to whom 'the Chinese create jobs that have next to no impact on the GDP of host states while the infrastructure projects they're involved in are short-lived and their products are poor quality.'⁶ An even tougher statement came from Martin Abega, the executive secretary of one of Cameroon's employers' organizations. 'The Chinese', he says, 'do not respect the rules of the game; they are the champions of contraband'.⁷

Either negative or favourable, the views expressed do not change the reality of a Chinese presence that is most visible in the popular excitement that surrounds Chinese *boutiques*. Whether selling doughnuts in Congo-Brazzaville, second-hand garments in Nigeria, loincloths in Togo or African spices throughout the region, Chinese traders have concentrated on poor people with small incomes. No sector is neglected by them, not even music. They make the largely poverty-stricken African population happy, as happened in October 2007 during the Muslim Eid-el-Fitr festival marking the end of the Holy Month of Ramadan, when thousands of Senegalese thronged in the Chinese shops to buy gifts and clothes for their children.

4 Speaking anonymously to this author, Freetown, January 2005.

5 Interview in Paris, February 2005.

6 Interview, January 2006.

7 Interview, April 2005.

'Without them, we would have been dishonoured,' said one of them to the Senegalese Press Agency.⁸

There is another, bigger, picture to the business drive by Chinese firms and traders. The large Chinese businesses display an effective business acumen when they operate with prices that are so low as to raise rumours that their real goal is to get rid of competition. This was the case of a toll-road section under construction in Dakar. The Sino-Senegalese consortium that won the bid with a CFA 24 billion bid left behind a French firm that had made a CFA 40 billion bid. The entry of the Chinese into the game has changed the rules.

Whatever one thinks of Chinese methods, it must be granted that the Chinese have a perfect understanding of the liberal economy, including the huge opportunities it offers as well as the many flaws. This goes a long way to explain China's success on the continent. This assimilation of the fundamental rules of globalization is visible more broadly in the rising power's qualified engagement with the international sphere. Furthermore, while it is much too early to speculate on this, it seems that this new worldwide Chinese strategy is, from an African perspective, very different from earlier foreign penetrations of the continent. We are no longer in the era of the missionary wave of Arab and white conquerors that subjugated Africa in bygone centuries.

In today's very different context, one can consider the Dakar Chinese, despite their modesty, as the new 'Conquistadors' on African soil. In Senegal, they are leading the pack. In a way, through their action, one can witness the projection of Chinese power through consumer goods and a cheap labour force. *Exeunt* the Bible and the gun that allowed Western European nations to dominate Africa in earlier ages. While these Western nations continue to seek virtual control of African economies by means of the international financial structure, like the IMF and the World Bank, still under their domination, China for its part follows a multi-pronged strategy. In its approach, the work of its small traders is complemented by other industrial and political actors, including industrial and company ex-

8 13 October 2007.

ecutives as well as top political operatives, who have increased their presence and visits in Africa.

Every discerning observer can easily detect this new China project through the Dakarois Chinese on the Boulevard Général De Gaulle. The same applies to anyone visiting other major African cities. The fact is that no matter how much it aims at discretion, the Chinese diaspora has now become very conspicuous. This starts even before their arrival to Africa, aboard the planes bringing them to the continent. 'They completely book out our planes', says a disorientated European air hostess, before adding: 'Do you know that Chinese sends its convicts to Africa, just as [was done in] Algeria, to use them as labour?'⁹ On the ground, the reality is even more compelling. In hotels, markets, mines, building sites and African streets, the Chinese are everywhere. Although they often keep to themselves and entertain very cold relations with local populations, they cannot go unnoticed.

Is there a hint of panic about this unexpected change? No doubt about that. Even if the extent of the Chinese presence and willingness to invest are still modest in regard to African needs, this presence carries important consequences, one of them being the potential possibility of a China taking over from the traditional foreign partners and actors on African soil. This is already suggested by a growing Chinese commitment: having reached US\$55 billion in 2006, Chinese trade in Africa is expected to reach US\$100 billion even before the set date of 2010. This growing trend is very connected with Chinese interest in oil and other mineral resources. In Algeria, Angola, Nigeria, Gabon, Sudan, Togo, Chad, Mauritania and many other oil-rich or potentially oil-rich locations, Chinese companies are actively seeking investment opportunities.

China as an alternative

The state of China-Africa relations was nowhere more evident than in the Forum for China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) Summit in Beijing in November 2006. African leaders flocked to this event

9 Interview, March 2005.

as if they had wanted to swear an oath of allegiance to the African continent's new tutor. Standing on a red carpet in the Great Hall of the People, President Hu Jintao could not hide his joy when, hand stretched out, he welcomed African heads of state one after another. Under the cameras of Chinese TV, attentive onlookers could discern the message that the Chinese President was aiming to send. Shortly after what recalled a traditional feature of China's relations with its neighbours in the past, the 'kow-towing' ceremony, Hu Jintao's announcement of a flurry of measures to help Africa showed that, behind the discourse of equality and the carnival atmosphere of the Summit, the Sino-African relationship is characterized by an undeniable asymmetry.

Yet African statesmen have not done much to redress this unbalanced rapport: they have merely adapted to it without much protest. Happy to have found shelter under the protective wing of a new patron, they have not hesitated to embrace the model that, while rejecting the term 'model', the Chinese are putting on the table. Ever since the demise of the Soviet 'model', many African leaders were longing for an alternative response to the Western neo-liberal political 'model'. The Chinese one is made more attractive by the fact that it also revives their power. It brings to a halt the decline of their role as leaders of African states emasculated over the past years by the combined action of the international financial institutions, the pressure of NGOs and the activities of various internal and external pro-democracy and human rights movements.

China is less concerned with promoting internal political changes, and democratization is not its main focus. It is not surprising therefore that, in addition to the financial aid promised by President Hu Jintao in his opening speech at the third FOCAC, the reaffirmation of China's policy of non-interference in the domestic affairs of sovereign states sounded like music to the ears of African rulers. This is the basis of the infatuation with China in the power circles of Africa. This discourse is articulated at a moment when the usual meddling foreign actors are going through major difficulties. Most of the Western nations are suffering from economic and financial woes and their international financial institutions have largely lost legitimacy owing to the poor results derived from the structural adjustment

policies they have promoted in the world. In contrast, China can be credited with its successes in reducing poverty: it has pulled roughly 400 million of its citizens out of poverty. With over \$1.4 trillion of foreign reserves, it now has considerable financial means to support its geopolitical interests in Africa. China's approach contrasts especially with the '*Diktat*' approach of the World Bank, the IMF and other traditional actors; it has imbibed the basic principles of public relations and comes with 'solutions', a message of respect and partnership, and a general deployment of 'soft power'.

China has therefore become an alternative choice for many African countries, political decisions-makers and intellectuals. It now occupies a political space that has for long remained vacant. This is the partnership African countries have been searching for since the end of the Cold War. It permits a rapprochement that is primarily articulated around state actors regardless of the anger this creates among the social forces that are excluded from it. These parallel social forces emanating from commercial, labour, and NGO segments of society look on with suspicion at the subterranean character of the new Sino-African relationship. The question has arisen whether China will have a positive impact on African development or, alternatively, its net result will be the rise of new oligarchies that will destroy the gains recently made across the continent in promoting multi-party democracy and good governance.

It is premature to make a definitive assessment of what the relationship between Africa and China will bring to the continent. At most, one can observe that in addition to its diplomatic efforts, China's presence in the continent is expressed through its companies that are showing an amazing dynamism. Specialized companies are on the ground in search of oil resources while others are pursuing efforts aimed at securing copper, iron ore or bauxite, those other mineral resources without which China cannot sustain its economical growth. Other Chinese groups are equally active in Africa; one example is the Bintumani hotel in Sierra Leone, which was built by Chinese businessmen even as that West African nation was going through a violent civil war in the 1990s.

There are three dimensions to China's strategy. The first is the necessity to secure long-term access to raw materials and resources like

oil to avoid being dependent on the volatility of market prices and unreliable conditions to get these products. Another aspect explaining China's drive is the ambition to position the country in other territories with a view to implementing its outbound policy 'beyond China's borders'. The objective is to strengthen China's foreign trade and external market share in order to reinforce the position of Chinese multinationals. Last but not least is China's quest to get diplomatic support in Africa. Consolidating the positions it has built over the recent years, reversing Taiwan's diplomatic gains obtained in the mid-1990s and enhancing Beijing's new global geopolitical ambition are the main reasons behind the more dynamic foreign policy pursued across the continent.

China's interests are now more important than anything else. Its presence represents a sharp departure from issues like human rights, as it refuses to back the position held by many Western nations in Africa in the aftermath of the Cold War. Those nations even preferred to withdraw from Africa to showcase their contempt for human rights violations, but China's attitude is different. 'We don't believe that human rights should be above sovereignty issues,' says Wenping He, Director of the Africa Department at the China Academy of Social Sciences.¹⁰ Not afraid of appearing as the accomplice of African dictatorships, and not bearing any regrets for its African policy, Beijing has allowed itself the means necessary to implement that policy relentlessly.

The long view

China's attitude is somehow dictated by memories of the breaking of relations with Moscow in the 1960s. Many in China have this in mind. It serves as a guide for Chinese leaders who understand the risks of being dependent on any powerful 'ally' able to become a 'rival', according to circumstances. Going to Africa offers another advantage to China as this move allows its companies to learn empirically how

¹⁰ Presentation at the conference 'A 'Chinese Scramble'? The Politics of Contemporary China-Africa Relations', Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge 12 July 2006.

to do business internationally. They gain experience which can be used elsewhere against American and other Western competitors. In this light, Africa is a guinea-pig continent for Chinese firms in their will to test their technological and industrial abilities with a view to successfully competing against their Western rivals, not just in Africa but elsewhere.

Above all, allowed so far to operate as they like, Chinese companies and officials have a unique opportunity to act in a close knit circle. Everything is done between them. Their interlocutors—or ‘partners’—from the continent are marginalized in the management, running and profit of companies. Silence is the watch-word. There seems to be a Chinese *omertà* at work that is made more efficient by the legendary discretion of the Chinese people, and their effectiveness. ‘We sell them our mineral resources and they sell us in return manufactured products with a predictable result: an imbalanced trade deficit that Africa will suffer from as the trade relations grow,’ complains Moeletsi Mbeki, a leading South African business and academic expert of the South African Institute of International Relations.¹¹

It is expected that China’s return to Africa will increasingly draw attention. Although they are stealthy, China’s efforts to conquer the continent, still under US and European influence, will be made difficult by the problems it will also encounter on the ground. Will China be able to root out the state and transnational actors that have been in place for so long? Its mission is almost like a dangerous gamble, despite the long relations of militancy that China built with several nations here from the mid-1950s. But the Chinese are always eager to say that nothing is new under the African sun and that their country has maintained relations with Africa for so long. ‘This relationship dates back from the foundation of modern China’ insist three Chinese experts from the China Institute of International Relations.¹²

Now China’s relationship with Africa is no longer driven by militant international proletarianism as it was from the 1950s to the

11 Quoted by Paul Mooney, in *China’s African Safari*, *YaleGlobal*, 3 January 3 2005.

12 Discussion in Beijing, March 2004.

mid-1970s. Today, following years of internal economic reforms, China has adopted a strategy mainly focused on its economic development and strategic long-term interests. This shift in priority, as in the past, was presented to African partners by the former Chinese Premier Zhao Ziyang on 13 January 1983 during a visit to eleven African nations (Algeria, Congo, Egypt, Gabon, Guinea, Kenya, Morocco, Tanzania, Zaire, Zambia and Zimbabwe). He explained that China would pursue equality and mutual advantage in sharing of profits, while refusing to make his country's cooperation dependent on any political conditionality apart from the 'One China Policy' which rules out recognition of Taiwan as a separate sovereign entity. After stating this stance, common in the Chinese approach to Africa, Zhao Ziyang said that efficiency in the execution of projects should be sought and these should not require a lot of investment. He also called for diversity in the forms of China cooperation, including the supply of technical services and the training of technicians, both top and low-grade ones. Zhao Ziyang also mentioned the idea of co-development not just for China but for its African partners, as the last aspect of the redefined African policy.

Keen observers of China were quick to understand that these measures would herald a new phase of realism. Gone was the time when China's support for 'African brothers' freed from colonial European rule was the main order of the day. Business and investment were now going to drive the relationship with Africa which began to be seen mainly as a market, if one put aside the Taiwan question. This evolution in China's relations with Africa was to be confirmed and enhanced later on, leading to a gradual 'normalization' of the China-Africa axis. Modernized, it now fits into the global framework of rational relations that China has managed to maintain with the rest of the world since the early 1980s.

Across Africa, from the busy shops of 'Boulevard Mao' in Dakar to the mining fields of Southern Africa, such as the Chambishi copper mine in Zambia, an assertive China has now made its mark in the continent. Its workers are building airports, railways and port facilities. Hospitals and museums or administrative buildings are made along the infrastructure geared towards facilitating the 'exfiltration' of the mineral and energy resources that China is seeking from Af-

rica. To prove that this continent has become a key dimension to their national strategy, Chinese leaders, starting from the President, continue year after year to pay visit to African nations and institutions, not even hesitating to go to the most remote places. Clearly, China's return to Africa is powerful. Yet some challenging questions are beginning to be raised, in the light of negative spill-over effects of the new relationship between China and the continent—a relationship that seems to have been mainly defined, to its advantage, by the Asian nation pursuing an age-old tradition of national interest in foreign policy. Beijing must be aware that years of democratization attempts have left in many African minds a sense of justice and equity; one can therefore expect a backlash against what some in Africa see as the beginning of a unilateral Chinese takeover of the continent. Relying on the complicity of local government leaders alone will not ensure China's long-term interest in the continent: the recent recriminations against China's presence, which even forced Hu Jintao to cancel a visit to the Chambishi copper mine in early 2007, were a stark reminder that the 'Jamboree' of the Sino-African Summit has not yet penetrated down to the level of the ordinary African man. China is expected to match its nice win-win words with deeds that will show it is committed in practice to a relationship that has nothing to do with previous foreign forays in the continent.

This is a tall order. China, a world giant, faces a serious challenge in Africa: its easy return and the rapid gains made in less than a decade may be misleading. It must wake up to the realities of a continent better able than ever to realize what it should demand as a result of its growing inclusion in world business and politics. So far, China's African safari has not yet faced the tough challenges that lie ahead. They may soon become unavoidable, as one should expect Africa to wake up to the threats going with the opportunities offered by a smiling dragon too kind to be sincere in its promise to build a relationship beneficial to its African partner in equitable terms.

