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The Chinese Presence in Burkina Faso: A Sino-African Cooperation from Below

Guive KHAN MOHAMMAD

Abstract: Burkina Faso currently has no diplomatic relationship whatsoever with the People’s Republic of China. Engaged in cooperation with Taiwan since 1994, it is one of only three African countries not a part of the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation. This unusual situation has produced a unique manifestation of the Chinese presence in Burkina Faso, where the estimated 600 Chinese migrants are primarily private entrepreneurs. This phenomenon of “globalization from below” – or, this migration of entrepreneurs that transcends the absence of diplomatic relations – creates new intimate social relations between the Burkinabe and Chinese people who come into contact with each other. Far from simply turning Chinese and Burkinabe into economic competitors, these relations have also led to the emergence of many forms of interpersonal and business cooperation. In this paper, I therefore demonstrate how Sino-African cooperation from below has developed in Burkina Faso, which stands in radical contrast to the latter’s cooperation with Taiwan, which takes place almost exclusively on a broader state-to-state level. The empirical evidence of this study is drawn from field survey interviews and observations of both Chinese and Burkinabe entrepreneurs in Burkina Faso between 2010 and 2011.

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Keywords: Burkina Faso, Chinese migration in Africa, Taiwanese cooperation in Africa, Sino-African cooperation, Globalization from below

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Introduction

Burkina Faso does not have a diplomatic relationship with the People's Republic of China. Along with São Tomé and Príncipe and Swaziland, Burkina Faso is one of the three remaining African states that support the international recognition of Taiwan (Aurégan 2011). While Sino-African relations have undergone a significant expansion in the last ten years (Brautigam 2009; Gabas and Chaponnière 2012; Rotberg 2008), due to its opposition to the “One-China” policy promoted by the Chinese government (Cabestan and Vermander 2005; Taylor 2002; Yu and Longenecker 1994) Burkina Faso's foreign policy towards Beijing has been non-existent since 1994. Its political orientation towards the Taiwanese government makes Burkina Faso an atypical case on the African continent, one currently marked by the growing geopolitical influence of China.

Despite the absence of diplomatic relations between China and Burkina Faso, the Chinese presence has been increasing within the country through migration since the end of the 1990s. This presence reflects the general increase of Sino-African migration flows, which recent literature has examined in numerous case studies, including in focuses on Benin (Dupré and Shi 2008), Cape Verde (Haugen and Carling 2005), Ghana (Giese 2013), Mali (Bourdarias 2009; Dupré and Shi 2008), Namibia (Dobler 2009), Niger (de Haas 2012), Senegal (Marfaing and Thiel 2011), South Africa (Park 2010), Togo (Sylvanus and Foucher 2009) and Zanzibar (Hsu 2007). The case study of Burkina Faso, however, will allow for the first time an understanding of the Chinese presence in an African country in a context that lacks any official diplomatic relations and international cooperation. In this paper, I will specifically examine this unique migration by categorizing the migration profiles of three sets of actors – cooperation representatives, state-owned enterprises (SOEs), and Chinese entrepreneurs – as conceptualized in the work of Kernen (2007; Kernen and Vulliet 2008). This work inspires a new reading of the Chinese presence in Africa, shifting from a monolithic understanding to one that highlights the autonomy of trajectories and the migration strategies of various actors.

The Chinese presence in Burkina Faso uniquely, and almost exclusively, consists of private entrepreneurs looking for new business opportunities. Their accumulation trajectories call into question classical conceptualizations of migration (Massey et al. 1993). Scholars

have characterized these Chinese entrepreneurs migrating to poor countries collectively as a “transnational middlemen minority” (Nyíri 2011). In similar transnational circulatory movements, Tarrius sees

the existence of another globalization: not the one of capital and technologies, but a globalization where the extension of powerful solidarities arouses new social relations. These new migration worlds produce a “mix”, a blend, a singular ability to be simultaneously here and there. They renew cosmopolitanism where the State – fierce guardian of citizenship – is not on guard, in unknown and inaccessible territories that it is unable to manage (Tarrius 2002: 156–157; author’s translation).

By taking into account the specific nature of migratory phenomena that transcend the logic of state management, the concept of “globalization from below” offers a framework adapted to the study of the Chinese presence in Burkina Faso. The absence of diplomatic relations assumes the non-existence of consular representation; furthermore, in the particular case of Burkina Faso, there is an added dimension of the complete lack of interest on the part of the Burkinabe state in controlling the Chinese presence and its commercial activities.

However, in the margins of this official position, any commercial activity suggests the existence of a social network, and given that social capital is already crucial in African business milieus, it is understood as even more so for ethnic minorities (Beuving 2006; Grégoire and Labazée 1993; Jensen and Kristiansen 2004). In this way, the arrival of Chinese entrepreneurs in Burkina Faso has entailed new social relations and enmeshing, where numerous collaborations continue to take place between Chinese and African people. These collaborations, which emerge parallel to any inherent commercial competition, demonstrate in various ways the existence of Sino-African cooperation from below, a mode even more salient in Burkina Faso than in other African countries, where this cooperation is not based on a pre-existing one at the state level. In this paper, I argue therefore that this “globalization from below” dynamic that is underpinned by Chinese migration to Burkina Faso and persists despite state inaction is contributing to the rise of a Sino-Burkinabe cooperation from below.

The paper will be structured as follows. After a concise introductory section covering historic relations between China and Burkina Faso along with Chinese immigration in this country, a typology of

actors' profiles will be presented. This first part will clarify the composition of the Chinese presence in Burkina Faso as well as its particularities. The second part will be devoted to the modalities that have allowed for this cooperation to develop from below. It will focus on the sometimes ambiguous attitude of the Burkinabe state towards this presence; the various types of cooperation that Chinese and Burkinabe people have developed; and their possible influence on the future foreign policy orientation of Burkina Faso.

The fieldwork in Burkina Faso was conducted in three trips spanning ten months.¹ This article draws from information obtained during semi-structured interviews with more than 170 people. The length of these interviews was usually between twenty minutes and two hours. I was also able to glean much information from informal discussions that took place over long hours spent in offices, shops and restaurants, as I took part in the daily life of the Chinese migrants and other businessmen of Burkina Faso. During my fieldwork, I spoke with people from 48 Chinese enterprises that had been established in Ouagadougou, seven in Bobo-Dioulasso and one in Ouahigouya. The relationship that I developed with some Chinese long-term immigrants opened my eyes to the presence of many of the less visible Chinese businesses. The main subjects of this research were Chinese entrepreneurs in Ouagadougou, with whom I conducted approximately 200 interviews. However, as I do not speak Chinese and because, on some occasions, respondents simply refused to talk with me, I also had to rely on numerous other sources. Chinese long-term immigrants, Burkinabe employees, neighbouring shopkeepers, associates and customers, as well as representatives of multiple ministries provided essential data for the realization of this research.

The Chinese Presence in Burkina Faso

On 14 December 1961, just after its independence, Burkina Faso made its cooperation with Taiwan official. But approximately a decade later, in 1973, Burkina Faso ended this partnership and reoriented itself, in accordance with United States foreign policy, towards an

1 This article is based on data collected between January 2010 and December 2011 within the framework of a Fonds National Suisse project on the Chinese presence in Africa supervised by Dr. Antoine Kernén, University of Lausanne, Switzerland.

alliance with China. While the architectural remains of this fleeting cooperation with China are still visible to this day in Ouagadougou, in 1994 the government of Burkina Faso yet again turned diplomatically towards Taiwan.

The trajectories of the Chinese community in Burkina Faso at first glance seem to be tightly intertwined with these different phases of official cooperation. The arrival of the first independent Chinese entrepreneur dates back to 1984. Originally from Shanghai, he rapidly acquired a sizable fortune in the trade of Chinese medicine. He left Burkina Faso in 1990, pursuing other activities in bordering countries before dying in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, in 2000. Between 1986 and 1990, approximately 15 individual entrepreneurs, all from Shanghai and selling medicine, came to Burkina Faso. Before diplomatic relations collapsed, there were an estimated 30 businessmen, while afterwards only five remained – a medical doctor, three retailers and one restaurant owner. The return to China of the last of these five businessmen in February 2010 marked the definitive disappearance of the early Chinese immigrants who had settled in Burkina Faso as part of this migratory wave from the late 1980s to the early 1990s.

The current Chinese presence in Burkina Faso is made up of individuals exclusively from post-1995 migration waves who therefore arrived during the period of no diplomatic relations between the two countries. At a practical level, this is not without consequences for migrants. The diplomatic turn towards Taiwan in 1994 was followed by the removal of Chinese embassies in Ouagadougou and of Burkinate embassies in Beijing, making the process to obtain a visa much more complicated. Chinese migrants overcome this difficulty either by delegating the process of obtaining a visa to a third party already present in Burkina Faso or by entering from a bordering country. Both of these visa processes require the Chinese migrants to have either pre-existing social networks in Burkina Faso or previous experience in a neighbouring country.

The General Migration Composition

Burkina Faso is unique in West Africa in that it welcomes a comparatively low number of Chinese migrants. According to the Territory Security Division of Ouagadougou, only 380 people of Chinese origin currently live in the country. This number is an estimate based on the number of people that extended their visas between 2008 and 2010.

According to my informants, a closer estimate of the Chinese population totals around 600, with 400 to 500 living in the capital city of Ouagadougou and the remaining split between the two cities of Bobo-Dioulasso and Ouahigouya. The difference between the official numbers and the unofficial estimates can be explained by the common practice of changeover in Chinese businesses that sees one team replacing another during a temporary return to China. From an anecdotal standpoint, the Chinese presence in Burkina Faso seems to be constantly growing. However, this trend is slow, the actual population increase estimated at approximately 20 new individuals per year.

The Chinese presence in Burkina Faso is also particularly notable in its unusual composition, which lacks migrants related to state-to-state cooperation and projects. According to my observations in the Burkinabe capital, of the more than 60 enterprises managed by Chinese immigrants, only one is state-owned. This sole public works enterprise is the China Geo-Engineering Corporation International Ltd. (CGC Int'l), which specializes in hydraulics and has only three Chinese employees in Burkina Faso. While the scarcity of SOEs could be related to the relatively resource-poor soil of Burkina Faso compared to other African states, it is interesting to note that a handful of Chinese multinational companies have successfully penetrated other lucrative business sectors, mostly in the importation of motorcycles – most notably Lifan Motors, although Huawei and ZTE have been located in Burkina Faso's telecommunications sector since 2007. In addition to these multinational companies are three medical doctors, two restaurants, one hotel, one print shop and one phone repair company, while the remaining Chinese presence is composed exclusively of small businesses.

The small Chinese businesses in the capital city are not different from their regional equivalents. They are for the most part located around the Rood-Woko central market, although this concentration is not comparable to the extreme density of Chinese businesses in places such as Dakar (Dittgen 2010). They do, however, share the same notable aesthetic characteristics, with their plethora of low-priced goods arranged often chaotically amongst overflowing cardboard boxes (Dupré and Shi 2008). The majority of these businesses follow a diversified business-opportunity approach by offering a variety of products ranging from fishing rods and plastic flowers to batteries, although a handful of businesses specialize in only one sector. These

specializations include medicine and drugs, cosmetics and perfumes, shoes, clothes and spare motorcycle parts.

Most Chinese immigrants in Burkina Faso are originally from Southern China, more specifically from Shanghai, Zhejiang Province and Fujian Province. In this regard, this migration from a particular constellation of Chinese provinces is not different from any other in Africa (Park 2010). Chinese immigrants in the capital are mostly men, with women accounting for no more than 30 per cent of the current population. Even rarer are children: I witnessed only two during my fieldwork in 2010. The migrants are on average between the ages of 25 and 45. The next section will categorize the entrepreneurs into four types of actors: the long-term residents, the expatriates, the small businessmen and the “adventurers”.

The Typology of Chinese Entrepreneurs in Burkina Faso

The Long-Term Residents

This first category is proportionally small and composed of Chinese people who have been, or intend to stay, in Africa for a comparatively long time. Whether Burkina Faso represents their initial destination or the final stage of a complex migratory path, these migrants now consider the country their adopted home. The diversity of their networks and their knowledge of the Burkinabe environment demonstrates their profound social integration. These Chinese long-term residents often have a solid educational background and hold a significant fortune, and in some ways they form a localized Chinese elite class. Furthermore, they hold substantial symbolic capital in the Chinese community, where they are often called upon for help by other, more recent Chinese migrants to compensate for the lack of an official Chinese entrepreneurs’ association in Burkina Faso. While social differences remain, these interactions and need-based cooperation among local Chinese long-term immigrants and Chinese small businessmen dampen the strong cleavages found in Chinese communities in other African countries. In order to help paint a picture of this category, profiles of three such immigrants will be examined: Dr. H., Dr. A. and Mr. I.

Dr. H. came from Shanghai to Koudougou in 1993 to work within the framework of the Chinese health cooperation project of the Hôpital de l’Amitié. When diplomatic relations were broken off in

1994, the Chinese government asked him to leave Burkina Faso. Yet Dr. H. decided to stay, stating, “A doctor is without borders. We should never confuse politics with the duty of taking care of people. Here, we [the people of Burkina Faso] need me” (Anonymous 1 2010). In 1994, he opened an office in Koudougou before deciding to relocate to Ouagadougou in 1998. By 1999 his business was thriving, and Dr. H. asked his son, who was finishing his medical training in China, to join him in Burkina Faso. Their medical consultations often bring them outside of Ouagadougou, where they are continually improving their French while also acquiring Mooré and Dioula language skills. Through their activities, they have developed relationships with civil servants and members of the Burkinabe government. In 2010, Dr. H. finally went back to China to retire, leaving to his son an office and two medicine shops. Now that the wife of Dr. H.’s son has joined him in Burkina Faso, Dr. H.’s son sees no reason why he should not spend his whole life in Ouagadougou. Although his five-year-old son currently lives in China, he plans to invite him to join him in Burkina Faso when he becomes an adult, like his father before him.

Dr. A. is the only Chinese immigrant to attain Burkinabe nationality, attesting to his willingness to settle long-term in the country. Certain grey areas in his profile suggest that he found in Burkina Faso a refuge. After training as a Chinese–French interpreter at the Foreign Languages Institute in Shanghai, Dr. A. furthered his training at the Diplomatic Institute in Beijing. Through Chinese diplomatic cooperation, he became an interpreter in Kigali (Rwanda) in 1982 and later in Abidjan in 1988. Problems – the details of which he would not share with me – with a Chinese businessman resulted in the Chinese embassy asking Dr. A. to return to China. Convinced that he would never be permitted to leave China again, he decided to stay in Africa. His non-compliance with this order led to him being dismissed without compensation from the position he held at the time. Following the advice of an Ivorian general, in 1998 he established himself in Ouagadougou, where he has worked as a therapeutic doctor since. He travels often to China but always with his Burkinabe passport. As he says, he has a very good historical and cultural understanding and a deep respect for his adopted country.

Lastly, the trajectory of Mr. I. is seen as an exemplary, and unusual, story of integration and business success amongst the Chinese

community of Ouagadougou. Mr. I. can be considered, in many regards, as an “Africa’s Chinese” (Vircoulon 2006). Son of a Hong Kong migrant who came to Côte d’Ivoire in 1973, Mr. I. was born in Abidjan in 1979. In 1984, his family moved to Cotonou, where his father developed a mat industry. After his schooling in Benin, Mr. I. pursued university-level education in management and marketing in China and Japan. When he returned to Africa, he married the daughter of a rich, long-established Chinese manufacturer in Benin and Niger, which brought together two family fortunes. In 1999, his father opened a new factory in Burkina Faso and left the management of the Cotonou factory to Mr. I.’s elder brother. After managing a decorating business for two years, Mr. I. began the construction of a high-end hotel in Burkina Faso. When his father went back to China in 2009, Mr. I. sold the factory and focused on the hotel. His hotel business caters to wealthy national and international customers and “gives him a great reputation” (Anonymous 2 2010). The birth of his first child in 2009, whom he already intends to educate in French, attests to his desire to further establish his presence in Burkina Faso.

The Expatriates

This second category, although more numerically significant than the first, is still relatively small with about 70 people, all working for Chinese multinational companies. Most of them are young and have recently completed a university degree in China. These expatriates have found in migration an opportunity to acquire experience and to build a professional network abroad, all while earning a good salary. They are hired on a contractual basis and rarely extend their stay past their contracts. Burkina Faso is, for the most part, but a *parenthèse africaine* in their career – a stage that will not usually lead to a career abroad. They tend to be more socially isolated and enjoy a higher standard of living than other migrants, which points to the relative lack of relations between this category and the rest of the Chinese community. As one expatriate notes, “We don’t see each other much, because there is a lot of business to do” (Anonymous 3 2010). Some explanations for their relative social isolation from the rest of the Chinese community include a strong sense of team spirit among these multinationals – which some even characterize as a “family” group cohesion – and the competition existing between various businesses

(Anonymous 4 2010). Here, two profiles are examined: Mr. L. and Mr. B..

Mr. L. is originally from Shanghai and holds an accounting degree. After several months looking for a job in China without any success, he responded to an advertisement for a job in Africa. Three months later, in June 2009, he was working in a tile store in Accra, Ghana. In October 2009, his boss moved him to his new store in Ouagadougou, even though Mr. L. did not speak French. Quick to emphasize the hard living conditions in Burkina Faso, Mr. L. nonetheless admits that his observations do not go beyond that of the store where he spends his days, the apartment that he shares with co-workers, and the Chinese restaurant where he usually eats on the weekends. Despite certain inconveniences due to his expatriate status and the rootless feeling he has, Mr. L. views this job as a great opportunity. However, he does not want to extend his contract, even though it is set to last no more than a year.

Mr. B.'s story contrasts sharply with that of Mr. L.. Mr. B., a 28-year-old former academic, originally hails from Zhejiang Province and chose to extend his stay in Burkina Faso after his first contract. He worked in the same store as Mr. L. in Ouagadougou. In June 2010, Mr. B. went back to China, without first extending his contract. With the money he earned in Burkina Faso, he travelled in China for a year, where he was unsuccessful in finding employment. Finally, a former co-worker from the tile store told him that a glass company wanted to diversify its West African operation. On the basis of his knowledge of Burkina Faso, he was hired to assess the commercial potential of the country. He came back to Ouagadougou at the end of 2011 as the regional manager of a glass company, demonstrating that contemporary young Chinese graduates find remarkable professional opportunities through migration. In particular, Mr. B. had a professional advantage because of his highly localized network and knowledge of the African context, which are very important elements in the internationalization process of many Chinese firms in Africa (Song 2011). Furthermore, according to him, his work in Burkina Faso offers him superior living conditions to those he could expect in China, as well as a lower investment in terms of work hours.

Burkina Faso's expatriate population is unique in that it is almost exclusively composed of these young graduates who find managerial positions at the beginning of their careers (Bourdarias 2009). How-

ever, this particularity must be interpreted in light of the comparatively small size of Chinese multinational corporations in Burkina Faso (Alden and Davies 2006), which is considered as a fringe market. Except for Huawei, ZTE and Lifan Motors, Chinese multinationals in Burkina Faso are taking their first steps toward globalized mobility. Hence, the use of young graduates seems appropriate for this initial stage of implementation. This differs from more well-established Chinese multinationals in Africa, which manage their human resources quite differently and in which a post in Burkina Faso is considered as a reward given to a deserving employee, usually at the end of their career.

The Small Entrepreneurs

This category is certainly the most represented and composes, according to my survey, more than 85 per cent of Burkina Faso's Chinese community. Small Chinese entrepreneurs between the ages of 25 and 45 who, for the most part, have held comparable positions in China, comprise this category. Although their profiles are similar to those of other small entrepreneurs in Africa (Giese 2013), their migration trajectories are nonetheless different due to Burkina Faso's specific immigration conditions. Thus, there is a demarcation between "guests" who had obtained their visas through an already-established contact and the ones who came to Burkina Faso by way of a neighbouring country, represented here as the "multinational family representatives". In both cases, these Chinese entrepreneurs come to the country due to a pre-existing contact in Africa and, in most cases, through family linkages.

Mrs. M., a shopkeeper from Shanghai, was 30 years old when her sister, who was married to a shopkeeper in Ouagadougou, suggested she join them. The couple, who already owned a store, was looking to expand their enterprise and needed Mrs. M. to manage it. Whereas for some "guests" there appears to be little choice in their migration, as in the case of young adults whose help is solicited by their parents, Mrs. M., on the contrary, saw the invitation as an opportunity to overcome professional difficulties in China. Her goal is to accumulate enough capital to start her own business. While many "guests" have this ambition, only few accumulate enough capital to pursue independent businesses even after years of hard work. In the case of Mrs. M., the invitation was for only one person, but it is not rare that hosts

extend the invitation to numerous “guests”, thus forming a migration chain (Do Rosario 2012). The significant number of migrants who come from Zhejiang Province illustrates this dynamic, where an invitation initiated by one entrepreneur led to the cascading arrival of 100 people.

The “multinational family representatives”, on the other hand, represent a minority among small entrepreneurs in Ouagadougou (about ten stores) and come to Burkina Faso through a bordering country as part of a commercial expansion strategy. Mr. G., since 1998 a storeowner in Lomé, Togo, decided to diversify his commercial activities in 2005. After numerous visits around the subregion, he set up a satellite business in Burkina Faso, stating, “There are not a lot of Chinese here. My products [mainly perfumes and cosmetics], I can sell them at a lower cost than everyone” (Anonymous 5 2010). As he still owns a store in Lomé, he orders for both businesses, taking advantage of economies of scale. However, not all multinational family representatives are owners. For example, one migrant, Mrs. T., was sent in 2009 to Burkina Faso by her father, a Chinese entrepreneur in Lomé, after only half a year in Togo. Speaking only a few words of French, she opened two stores, one in Ouagadougou and one in Bobo-Dioulasso. She shares the management with her brother. In general, Burkina Faso is portrayed as a receiving country for these expansion phenomena, with only one businessman who expanded his activities from Ouagadougou to Accra.

The characterization of “natural” cooperation amongst Chinese businessmen simply because of their shared nationality is particularly problematic when exploring the social dynamics of Chinese communities abroad (Laribee 2008). There are, in fact, many tensions between Chinese entrepreneurs, both personal and business-related, which limit the potential for collaboration. In Burkina Faso, although the Chinese presence is still low compared to other African countries where it has reached a perceived saturation point (Haugen and Carling 2005), business competition is nonetheless an obstacle to social cooperation. One entrepreneur told me: “When I arrived in Ouagadougou, I went to see Chinese people. I was not very well welcomed. They thought I came to spy on their stores” (Anonymous 6 2011).

The Adventurers

Represented by only three people in Burkina Faso, this last category is the smallest. The “adventurers” category was first outlined by Kernen and Vulliet in their analysis of the Chinese presence in Dakar and Bamako (2008). These migrants stand out from the others because of their autonomous migratory trajectory. Contrary to the small entrepreneurs, these adventurers did not come to Burkina Faso as guests or to contribute to the expansion of a neighbouring country’s business.

Mr. U.’s story offers a good illustration of what, in particular, characterizes this tiny category of migrants. Originally from Henan, Mr. U. earned his university degree in France. Graduating with a degree in economics, he went back to China to get married. Finding no work in China, he was finally hired as a translator for a glass company in Algiers, Algeria. After his one-year contract came to a close, he went back to China in order to gather funds to start his own business in Africa. According to him, “There are possibilities here, unlike in China” (Anonymous 7 2010). To realize his project, he used family funds and evaluated the economic potential as well as various economic sectors in different countries over several months of travel throughout Western Africa. He settled in Burkina Faso in 2007. His business specializes in spare parts for motorcycles. On that topic, he says: “I did not know anything about motorcycles. I started it all here. It is a bit like I was drunk when I made this decision” (Anonymous 7 2010). However, his business is quite lucrative, allowing him to regularly send back money to the rest of his family in China, including his wife.

A Cooperation from Below

The Chinese presence in Burkina Faso has not generated any discussion at a national level. It is in no way a security issue, unlike in some other African countries, such as South Africa (Gastrow 2001). A representative of the Burkinabe Ministry of Security recently stated, “We have no worries with this community. They have not had any problems with anyone” (Anonymous 8 2011). At the business level, although it contributes to a reconfiguration of the business competition climate, the Chinese presence has not been contested in any organized way, by local merchant associations or trade unions. The

fact that Chinese stores located around the central market close their doors during any strikes and protests is attributable more to a general property precaution than to fear of anti-Chinese sentiment that can be seen elsewhere in Africa (Harris 2010; Park 2010).

The lack of state-owned enterprises and development projects – which helps considerably to reduce the visibility of the Chinese presence and its strategic significance – can explain the lack of public debate on the question. The silence of Burkinabe news media on the Chinese presence represents a sharp contrast to the continual media attention surrounding Taiwanese cooperation in Burkina Faso. Beyond the simple lack of interest, this contrast is also, to a lesser extent, based upon the challenges the media faces when talking about a thriving Chinese community whose presence is not based on any diplomatic legitimacy. Compared to the 30 Taiwanese entrepreneurs who settled in Ouagadougou independently, the Chinese presence represents an awkward challenge for the government agencies in charge of international cooperation. It reveals the existence of a Sino-Burkinabe relationship from below in radical contrast to the Taiwanese cooperation taking place almost exclusively at a state level.

The Burkinabe State and the Chinese Presence

The Burkinabe state pays little attention to the presence of Chinese migrants on its territory. This mirrors a similar trend in other African countries, although on occasion this presence is exploited for political ends (Mohan and Tan-Mullins 2009). There are, however, notable occasions when the state is called to action concerning Chinese entrepreneurial activities. In these cases, Burkinabe official actions are often institutionally inconsistent, given the government's usual "hands-off" approach, and this creates uncertainty for entrepreneurs.

One example of the Burkinabe state's unpredictability includes the inconsistent application of sanctions. The case of the Chinese company Fei Fei clearly illustrates this, where the head managers, after a six-year-long trial, were convicted of selling counterfeit Niche brand clothing and ordered to pay 5,200 USD in damages and interest. In 2010 their stock of 1,650 pieces of twelve lengths of cloth was incinerated at their cost. It remains unclear why the Burkinabe state targeted this company in particular, as many other clothing brands, including the famous Dutch brand Vlisco, are also often counterfeited by other companies. Even though counterfeit Vlisco

businesses are often spotted by customs services, no legal action has been taken against them to date. Furthermore, since the Fei Fei verdict, Nichem counterfeit pieces have reappeared on the market. Most likely, the Burkinabe state was attempting to make an example of one Chinese company, while similar measures have not been consistently applied since.

In addition to the well-known cases where an offence was committed and sanctioned, there are also cases where no sanctions are enforced precisely because the nationality of violators was Chinese. Like other African countries, Burkina Faso is deeply affected by “fake medicines”. In October 2011, the Cobra operation, conjointly organized in six West African countries with the support of Interpol, led to the seizure of tons of medicines and the indictment of more than 100 people. Although a few Chinese businesses from Ouagadougou “had developed important and efficient ‘fake medicine’ distribution networks that were even as well organized as official ones” (Anonymous 9 2010), no Chinese entrepreneur has been arrested. Their stock was seized, but in contrast to African vendors, no judicial proceedings were initiated against them. A confidential source from the Ministry of Health told me that to sanction Chinese entrepreneurs while lacking a diplomatic relationship with China would have been “too delicate” (Anonymous 10 2011). Since this operation, most of the Chinese businessmen have left this medicine-trading sector, which was historically linked to their first settlements in Burkina Faso.

Furthermore, the absence of Sino-Burkinabe diplomatic relations has not prevented Chinese businessmen from receiving official protection. The most striking case is an affair between Megamonde, a Lebanese–Burkinabe motorcycle company and its supplier, JinCheng. Both companies signed an exclusive sale contract in 2001 in which Megamonde could use all parts produced by JinCheng, registered since 1999 at the African Intellectual Property Organization (AIPO) under the label CJ JinCheng. However, in April 2003, Megamonde registered its assembled motorcycles at the AIPO under the label JC JinCheng, although these motorcycles were built with spare parts already registered by JinCheng. In 2003, both companies broke the contract. Three years later, a judicial battle began over the patent of the label, with JinCheng accusing Megamonde of counterfeit. In May 2010, the court of appeals in Ouagadougou agreed with JinCheng,

and Megamonde was finally required to compensate the Chinese company.

The absence of Chinese diplomatic guarantees and the inconsistent behaviour of the Burkinabe state vis-à-vis the Chinese presence are factors that increase the risks faced by Chinese investors in the country. Thus, although gold was found in northern Burkina Faso, and Chinese firms expressed interest in further exploring the deposits, no investment has yet been made. For Chinese entrepreneurs already settled in Burkina Faso, this uncertain climate is part of their day-to-day lives. Many articulate the feeling that their trading activities are checked more often than those of their African counterparts. To avoid any problems, some of them describe limiting their visibility by keeping their activities relatively private and avoiding certain sectors deemed strategic or politically charged. Indeed, during the fieldwork interviews, one migrant emphasized this constant concern surrounding invisibility, saying, “You cannot say we are in Burkina Faso. We cannot be here. China is not here” (Anonymous 11 2010).

The cases where Burkinabe authorities take strong public positions regarding Chinese migrants are currently the exception, not the rule. The official behaviour of Burkina Faso regarding activities of Chinese entrepreneurs is more one reflecting a “hands-off” attitude than one of direct control. However, this *laissez-faire* approach is not particular to the Chinese, but rather demonstrates the general lack of regulation of economic activities in Burkina Faso (Labazée 1995). In that regard, Chinese businesses are managed by the state mostly in the same way as African ones. Just like any entrepreneur from anywhere in the world, a Chinese person can start a business after obtaining the appropriate licences and paperwork, a process which rarely exceeds a week. Counterfeit products are common to both Chinese and African stores, and both readily admit that some of their products are imported in ways that circumvent the Burkinabe state.

The Sino-Burkinabe Cooperation on the Ground

While the Burkinabe state remains largely aloof towards Chinese entrepreneurs, the Burkinabe people themselves are more concerned with it. The Chinese presence is not new itself, but the social consequences of its various shifts are often debated in private. Like elsewhere in Africa (Bredeloup and Bertoncetto 2006), the presence of Chinese migrants is sometimes viewed in a negative light: “Here, we

did not know fraud, but strangers came”, “There is nothing we can do against Chinese!”, “We have nothing against the fact that Chinese people came, we have something against the fact that they sell things at a lower cost” (Anonymous 12 2010). However, not all discourse revolves around commerce or necessarily contains a negative tone. One can also hear comments such as the following in Ouagadougou: “If the Chinese had colonized us, we would be more developed” (Anonymous 13 2011). In Burkina Faso, just as in other African countries, the Chinese presence is perceived in various ways, depending on who is questioned and what interests are at stake (Esteban 2010).

Whatever the perception of Chinese people, the ease with which their presence is discussed indicates how accustomed Burkinabe have become to Chinese people in their day-to-day affairs. The stay of Chinese entrepreneurs has indeed led to numerous new social connections, demonstrating how Sino-African relations from below include the logic of both competition and collaboration. While competition does exist between Burkinabe and Chinese entrepreneurs, this article finds that these issues are articulated in Burkina Faso similarly to the way they are articulated in other African countries. Its analysis in Burkina Faso does not offer much to the discussion. Furthermore, the myopic emphasis on this theme in the literature on the Chinese presence in Africa demonstrates a lack of understanding of Sino-African relations from below, a topic only a handful of research projects have been able to grasp (Haugen 2011).

In Burkina Faso, cooperation with local people is not only an essential part of the trade strategy promoted by Chinese entrepreneurs, but also the most effective way to ensure the establishment and success of their business activities over time. As Portes underscores:

In a context of uncertainty, exchanges will lead to stronger links than the ones that exist among fully informed partners who are subject to equal and applicable laws (Portes 1999: 18; author’s translation).

Political and legal uncertainty is a daily struggle for any migrant, but especially for migrants that cannot count on diplomatic protection. Sino-Burkinabe cooperation appears on three levels depending on the type of actors it mobilizes – first, between employers and employees; second, through a partnership between two businesses; and third, in

relations between Chinese entrepreneurs and representatives of the Burkinabe administration.

On the first level, cooperation can take place between employees and employers. In numerous Chinese businesses, there is a “trusted person”, or a local whose abilities or engagement make him particularly useful to his employers. Mr. P. holds such a position in a multi-national motorcycle enterprise where, since having been put in contact with his Chinese employers through a Burkinabe friend residing in China, he has helped with the growth of the enterprise from Lomé to Ouagadougou. He was first assigned to find adequate premises to do business, and later put in charge of multiple tasks related to commercial development. Although he had business experience only from being a mechanic, his highly localized and extensive social network in Burkina Faso was significant and instrumental for the Chinese enterprise to be able to develop a customer base. Although his skill set may make him appear to be easily replaceable, Mr. P. has acquired a special trusted status within the company: “Because I began with them and that it worked out, they trust me and now I am a commercial agent.” He concludes that “Chinese are not like people think. They like to work with a person who works well, that is all!” (Anonymous 14 2011)

Sometimes, the “trusted person” serves as an intermediary in situations of potential conflict. Mr. Z., hired in 2010 by a Chinese company based in Ouagadougou two years earlier, was confronted with this type of situation, where the company’s Chinese entrepreneurs were infuriated by customs taxes, which they found excessive and refused to pay. The trucks transporting their supplies were held up at customs, and consequently, the truck drivers had asked for damage compensation. Responsible for negotiations, Mr. Z. was able to resolve the situation and negotiate a lower cost. Since then, he has been assigned to customs clearance, where he tries to keep import fees to levels acceptable to his employers. Taking responsibility for his employer’s commercial policy, however, occasionally poses risks for Mr. Z., a fact manifested most evidently in an altercation with protesting drivers in 2011 that left him covered in bruises.

In Burkina Faso, as elsewhere in Africa, employees who speak Chinese are appreciated and sought out by Chinese entrepreneurs (Kernen and Vulliet 2008). The cooperation between interpreters and employers is often much deeper than the one with “trusted people”.

Their responsibilities include the management of supplies and personnel on top of other tasks related to the establishment and development of the enterprise. Furthermore, it is not unusual to see these relationships extend beyond the professional level to leisure activities together. In many regards, these employees are the right-hand people of Chinese entrepreneurs. In Burkina Faso, interpreters are in high demand, as their number is quite low. Paradoxically, most gained their Chinese-language skills through the Taiwanese cooperation's bursary exchange programmes.

The second level of Sino-Burkinabe cooperation is defined by collaborative relationships developed between Chinese and Burkinabe enterprises. In the motorcycle sector, for example, the distribution network of Chinese companies specialized in importation relies on close partnerships with Burkinabe resellers and distributors. One Chinese company based in Ouagadougou created a special partnership by joining four local wholesalers with the goal of making them its only distributors. These local wholesalers benefit from advantageous payment conditions, as they can acquire their products on credit. The fact that the Chinese trade director does not know the exact names of the companies, but rather only knows the name of each of their directors points towards the personal relationship that this kind of structure tends to establish.

Such examples of cooperation can be observed in all Chinese enterprises in Burkina Faso. In fact, the same logic applies to petty traders who regularly visit Chinese wholesalers to resell their supplies in their stores or even in the streets. Such networks can even be built by Chinese themselves, as was the case for "Chinese doctors", who are Burkinabe medicine sellers to whom Chinese traders delivered accelerated training and offered their initial supplies on credit. Far from being specific to Burkina Faso, this type of commercial cooperation plays a central role in the success of Chinese entrepreneurs all over Africa.

The CGC Int'l case, however, demonstrates the potentially necessary collaboration between Chinese and Burkinabe enterprises in Burkina Faso. As mentioned earlier, CGC Int'l is a Chinese state-owned enterprise. Although it is well established in a number of African countries, the lack of relations at a state-to-state level prevents its successful establishment in Burkina Faso. For more than two years, CGC Int'l has systematically failed to obtain public contracts when

bidding for tenders. In 2008, it partnered with a Burkinabe enterprise to submit its bid to participate in a large drilling project co-financed by the African Development Bank and Burkina Faso. Even if the contribution of the Burkinabe enterprise was but marginal, its name was put forward in order to win the bid.

Finally, a third type of cooperation can emerge with political elites or representatives from the Burkinabe administration. For Chinese entrepreneurs in Burkina Faso, this type of collaboration is the one that guarantees the most benefits in terms of investment security and business development, and involves active initiatives by actors at different institutional levels. Small retailers develop cooperative relationships with lower-profile civil servants, mostly through their employees, often concerning the various legal steps involved in importation. Having a customs official as a personal acquaintance, for example, can guarantee that usually slow and tedious proceedings be sped up. This cooperation in Burkina Faso, as elsewhere, is based on corruption – practices considered in African Studies as institutionally endemic (Blundo and Olivier de Sardan 2001) and therefore hardly attributable solely to the Chinese presence. Although these relationships between civil servants and entrepreneurs are generally limited to economic activities, they can sometimes be nourished by a common passion. For example, Mr. J., a Chinese entrepreneur who sells fishing poles, goes fishing with his customers, some of them policemen, every Sunday. When there is a change of ownership in a store, businesses make an effort to systematically integrate the new team into such networks before the old team departs.

Company X, which I have decided to anonymize, illustrates well the business advantages that can be gained through higher-level political relationships. In 2008, this Chinese company was granted industrial status, allowing it to substantially reduce its customs clearance taxes, even though the company was solely focused on importation, not industrial production. When its relations with the Chinese headquarters began to deteriorate, the company's Burkina Faso director began to sell counterfeit products without any retaliation from the authorities. Meanwhile, the company regularly borrows – apparently without loan guarantees – large amounts from a bank in Ouagadougou. In April 2011, the company's director fled Burkina Faso with significant amounts of cash, leaving behind almost 60,000 USD in debt. According to many employees, the director had developed a

good relationship with a member of an influential association closely related to the president of Burkina Faso. One employee commented, “It is thanks to [this member] that the Chinese [businessman] was successful in establishing his company, because he put [the businessman] in contact with the ministers” (Anonymous 15 2011).

Is Taiwanese–Burkinabe Cooperation Threatened?

Although Sino-Burkinabe cooperation sometimes leads to more interpersonal relationships, these connections are borne out of and revolve around economic interests. Beyond the social level, these interests empower Sino-Burkinabe economic relationships at the international level. An analysis of the cash flows between Burkina Faso and China and Taiwan highlights an important disconnect between trade exchanges and international cooperation orientation. Thus, in 1995, when Burkina Faso was supporting Taiwan, the former’s global exchanges with the latter totalled nearly 2.4 million USD whereas over 5 million USD was exchanged with China. This gap has widened overtime. In 2011, trade with Taiwan reached almost 19 million USD; with China the corresponding number was close to 381 million USD. Furthermore, this wide gap between Taiwanese and Chinese trade is not unique to Burkina Faso, but similar to all of the other three African countries currently engaged in official cooperation with Taiwan (UNCTAD 2013).

Despite its overwhelming trade-flow orientation towards China, the official Burkinabe government position is to favour an economic relationship with Taiwan. Chinese entrepreneurs undeniably participate in this reorientation of trade development toward China. However, contrary to what Aurégan states (2011), Burkinabe traders also play an active economic role in these exchanges. As highlighted by recent literature, African traders occupy a central position in Sino-African trade, right up to establishing themselves in China (Bertoncello and Bredeloup 2009; Bodomo 2010; Mathews and Yang 2012). Whereas research by Marfaing and Thiel (2011) shows the predominance of Senegalese entrepreneurs in the Sino-Senegalese trade, in the Burkinabe case, no statistics exist to support this thesis. There is, however, clearly a growing number of Burkinabe transnational traders penetrating the Chinese market – either by suitcase or by container (Marchal 2007) – in this reorientation of international exchanges from below.

Most Burkinabe businessmen organize their first trip to China based on advice from other African traders. But some also rely on Chinese entrepreneurs in Burkina Faso, who act as consultants. Dr. A.'s case is clearly one of collaboration: He has made several trips to China with Burkinabe "friends" in order to provide them with the necessary connections for their businesses. While this kind of activity may seem to be restricted to a minority of Chinese migrants, each migrant can be seen, to a certain extent, as an unofficial Chinese ambassador (Alden 2007). Through the relationships they create, the supplies they sell, and the ideals they share, Chinese entrepreneurs in Burkina Faso and Burkinabe entrepreneurs who trade with China contribute to the creation of an idealized global destination, in which China is portrayed as an El Dorado.

This attractiveness of China as an entrepreneurial destination has led to the establishment of Burkinabe support networks that work to overcome the lack of diplomatic relations. The Forum d'Amitié Sino-Burkinabé (FASIB), instituted in 2005, is the most striking example of such an organization. With 60 active members, this association had as its honorary president the former chairman of the Africa and Middle East Regions of the International and Marketing Department of Areva, Zéphirin Diabré, who has been Burkina Faso's opposition leader since the legislative elections of 2012. Each year, FASIB organizes meetings between Chinese and Burkinabe entrepreneurs in both China and Burkina Faso. Since 2010, this organization has been serving as an unofficial intermediary for obtaining visas from the Chinese embassy in Côte d'Ivoire.

The "natural" development of exchanges between China and Burkina Faso contrasts radically with the official implementation efforts by Taiwan to promote trade through its cooperation with Burkina Faso. Similar to the Foire Internationale Multisectorielle de Ouagadougou, which welcomed a dozen Taiwanese firms in February 2010, the Taiwanese embassy regularly organizes events to raise the economic visibility of its businesspeople. The embassy also actively cooperates with the Chamber of Commerce of Ouagadougou to initiate business meetings between Taiwanese and Burkinabe entrepreneurs during annual trips to Taipei. In order to facilitate investment, the Burkinabe Investment Code has been translated into Chinese and is available on the website of the Embassy of Taiwan in Burkina Faso. Despite all these official efforts, Taiwanese private

investments in Burkina Faso are still smaller than those that can be observed in Swaziland, for example, where 30 textile factories have been established (Rotunno, Vézina, and Wang 2012).

The obstacles to trade and investment cooperation faced by Taiwan in Burkina Faso force Taipei to place greater emphasis on other forms of official cooperation. Although Taiwan appears generous in regards to each of its last three African supporters (Lu 2011), this is especially true in the case of Burkina Faso, which is currently the most important of these few remaining countries (Aicardi de Saint-Paul 2009). Taiwanese cooperation is mainly focused on technical assistance, because as Taiwanese Ambassador to France Lu Ching-Long explains, “Taiwan is a country that eradicated poverty and is able to share its experience at the international level” (Lu 2013). In Burkina Faso, Taiwan has implemented 68 projects in a variety of domains, including agriculture, health, culture, defence, construction, education and research, sports, the environment and state administration. More than 350 million USD has been invested there, making Taiwan one of the most important partners of Ouagadougou (Aurégan 2011). Furthermore, in supporting the Burkinabe presidency’s national engagements and in constructing the National Reference Centre for Technical and Vocational Training in Ziniaré, Blaise Compaoré’s home village, Taiwan has made itself even more indispensable to the current ruling regime. Thus, the government of Burkina Faso undeniably takes advantage of its cooperation with Taiwan. Furthermore, Burkina Faso holds a central position in regard to Taiwanese cooperation, rather than being overshadowed by other African giants, which more aptly describes its cooperation with China. One representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Burkina Faso summarized it in this way: “It is better to be the mouse’s head than the lion’s tail” (Anonymous 16 2010).

However, a representative from the Taiwanese embassy announced that

The lack of a popular base strengthens the belief that cooperation between Taiwan and Burkina Faso is but a relationship among people in high places (Anonymous 17 2010).

Echoing this sentiment, some voices have been raised in opposition to official cooperation with Taiwan and in favour of official intergovernmental relations with China. As one member of the Taiwanese embassy said with regret,

There are a lot of Burkinabe members of parliament and ministers in the business sector who would like to see things change. The [former] president of the Chamber of Commerce of Ouagadougou is always absent during our speeches because all his business is done with China (Anonymous 17 2010).

Such contestations and their potential implications for foreign policy should not be underestimated. According to Mohan and Lampert (2013), in Ghana and Nigeria, high-level African actors are more than capable of shaping Sino-African relationships in ways that advance their own interests and aspirations. In fact, such dynamics are already noticeable in regards to the diplomatic reorientation of Senegal in 2005 (Gadio and Diop 2013). In that regard, Sino-Burkinabe relationships from below could influence the future of diplomatic cooperation with the Taiwanese government.

Conclusion

The lack of diplomatic relations between China and Burkina Faso directly shapes the composition of Chinese migrants in Burkina Faso, creating a unique Chinese community on the continent. Regarding the tri-typology that generally characterizes Chinese migration to Africa – the cooperation representatives, the state-owned enterprises and the Chinese entrepreneurs – only this third category is significantly represented in the Burkinabe context. While the lack of official cooperation projects is due to the breakdown of diplomatic relations, state-owned enterprises currently hold a relatively autonomous status vis-à-vis the state (Downs 2007). This autonomy, however, is marked by narrow access to public markets and the inconsistent business environment, which is attributable to the absence of official diplomatic relations between the states. However, the fact that some manage to overcome these barriers may suggest that the relative absence of Chinese SOEs in Burkina Faso could also be due to the relatively weak economic opportunities in the country which, in most cases, are already dominated by actors that are historically more well established.

In regard to private entrepreneurs, the absence of an embassy of Burkina Faso in China creates unique difficulties for Chinese citizens attempting to obtain a visa and may subsequently explain the small number of Chinese migrants in Burkina Faso. For the most part,

however, beyond visa difficulties, they do not seem to suffer from the consequences of the breakdown of diplomatic relations. Beyond the rare cases where the Burkinabe state intervened, cases where its actions have belied a certain ambiguity, Chinese migrants have largely benefitted from the lack of constraining economic regulation. This migration is not part of any public debate at the national level that could have added any problematic dimension to the migrants' settlement. As such, transcending the institutional framework defined by state relations, the Chinese migration to Burkina Faso is illustrative of globalization from below.

In that regard, these transnational migratory movements contribute to building new social relations between the Chinese and the Burkinabe. Even if they are part of competition logic that characterizes businesses around the world, these migrations, in particular, generate face-to-face cooperation and creative collaborations. This article identified three types of cooperation: first, cooperation between Burkinabe employees and Chinese employers; second, cooperation between Chinese and Burkinabe businesses; and third, cooperation between businesspeople and political and administrative representatives. These collaborations are strategically established by Chinese entrepreneurs in order to ensure the durability and development of their activities. Reciprocally, Chinese entrepreneurs found that having Burkinabe people participating in their businesses furthered both of their economic interests. These alliances constitute a cooperation from below between China and Burkina Faso, in radical contrast to the Taiwanese cooperation that takes place only from above or on a state-to-state level. The growing popular basis on which this Sino-Burkinabe cooperation is built raises questions about a potential future change in Burkina Faso's foreign policy orientation towards Taiwan.

Finally, the case study of the presence of Chinese migrants in Burkina Faso evinces a few distinct characteristics that do not mesh with the general conclusions of studies done in other African countries and provides a fresh perspective on the highly varied dimensions of Chinese cooperation in Africa. In particular, the results of the field research should urge us to rethink the current academic dichotomy between the development of Sino-African cooperation on the state-to-state level and the competition among Chinese and African actors at the micro-level. First, the scope of this competition has been reas-

sessed, not by proving that business competition does not exist, but instead through a careful delineation and exploration of the numerous forms of collaboration and cooperation that take place on the ground and enable these businesses to exist and thrive. Second, using the case of Burkina Faso, this article underscores the fact that the economic indicators normally used as evidence of these interstate relations, such as trade exchange statistics, are often largely composed of non-state actors, which indicates the economic force of “globalization from below”. Whereas the transnational business activities of many Chinese and African entrepreneurs routinely challenge the limits of the nation-state, the weight of individuals in international trends can no longer be ignored. In Africa, there is no state-to-state Chinese cooperation without Sino-African cooperation and collaborations happening on the ground, from below.

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