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# In the Shadow of the States: The Informalities of Chinese Petty Entrepreneurship in Nigeria

Allen Hai XIAO

**Abstract:** The burgeoning interstate relation between China and Nigeria is in fact hiding the vulnerable condition of transnational Chinese petty entrepreneurship. Small-scale Chinese entrepreneurs in Nigeria are faced with everyday corruption practised by both Nigerian authorities and ordinary Nigerian people, the dominance of self-interest over cohesion and mutual support among the Chinese compatriots, and variations in state policies due to dynamic and changing interstate relations. To overcome their position of weakness, small-scale Chinese entrepreneurs strategize their interactions with both Nigerian and Chinese nationals. Informality is a characteristic of such interactions. Economic informality is primarily embodied in the documentation service businesses that are indebted to those popular corrupt practices in Nigeria; while social informality takes place in cyberspace. Interaction via the Internet among Chinese involved in Chinese–Nigerian businesses helps small-scale Chinese entrepreneurs to cope with fluctuations in interstate links at the macro-level and to develop a sense of community.

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**Keywords:** China, Nigeria, petty entrepreneurship, informality, states

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## Introduction

China–Africa relations have attracted significant attention in recent years; indeed, with the development of bilateral interactions between China and various African countries, the field of China–Africa studies has emerged (Monson and Rupp 2012). A growing number of research projects have moved from focusing on the national level (Alden 2007; Taylor 2009; Shinn and Eisenman 2012) to concentrating on the community and individual levels, covering the Chinese presence in a range of African countries, including Cape Verde (Haugen and Carling 2005), Tanzania (Hsu 2007), Namibia (Dobler 2009), South Africa (Park 2009) and Ghana (Giese and Thiel 2012). Ethnography has become a useful tool in shedding light on the Chinese presence on the ground on the African continent (Strauss 2012). This article is an ethnographic study of small-scale Chinese entrepreneurs in Nigeria.

The definition of “small-scale entrepreneur” is based on Smart and Smart’s (2005: 3) account of petty capitalists as “individuals or households who employ a small number of workers but are themselves actively involved in the labour process”. Considering the context of this research, I would add that the social status of this group of people also needs to be taken into account, as well as their labour process. Small-scale Chinese entrepreneurs in Nigeria do not have much in the way of social connections with institutions like the Chinese embassy and consulate, state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and big private corporations. They may earn more money compared to levels of income at home in China, but actually they tend to make less than the Chinese staff in the institutions mentioned above; moreover, they generally have a lower social status and live with the uncertainties that accompany transnational business.

This weak connection with the state, however, does not imply that small-scale Chinese entrepreneurs live and work in a non-state context. Instead, they negotiate the cultural constitution of states in their everyday lives (Sharma and Gupta 2006). Regulation (Roitman 2005) and corruption (Gupta 1995) are both constitutive of the governmentality of states and are entangled with the strategic practices of petty entrepreneurship. This paper will shed light on the vulnerable situation of small-scale Chinese entrepreneurs under (inter)state effects.

Despite the vulnerability of Chinese petty entrepreneurship in the China–Nigeria context, small-scale entrepreneurs develop strategies to cope with state effects. The author argues that informality is a characteristic of such strategic practices. In this article, informality is categorized into two types: economic and social.

Economic informality widely exists in the informal sector, which includes “all income-earning activities that are not regulated by the state in social environments where similar activities are regulated” (Portes and Haller 2005: 404; Portes, Castells, and Benton 1989: 12). This definition slightly overemphasizes the distinction between the informal and the formal economy. Guha-Khasnabis, Kanbur, and Ostrom argue

that the formal–informal continuum [applies] strictly to the continuum between relatively high and relatively low levels of the reach of official governance mechanisms, suitably specified and measured in each context (Guha-Khasnabis, Kanbur, and Ostrom 2006: 7).

Moreover, Hart (2006: 29–31) proposes four ways in which the informal economy relates to formal orders: division, content, negation and residue. I concur with the “continuum” argument and will elaborate on it based on the case of small Chinese businesses in Nigeria.

Social informality is a characteristic of transnational communications in cyberspace. Misztal (2000) interprets (in)formality as an interactional resource, and I further refine the term within social practice with regard to the economic practice of informality (above). In informal social interaction, “people can cooperatively change the course and speed of conversational flow, thereby maximizing the amount of information and exploration of the topic” (Misztal 2000: 34), which is a feature of online behaviour. Nevertheless, social formality and informality “provide practical solutions to situated interactional problems and, therefore, facilitate the local production of social order” (Misztal 2000: 35). Since many small-scale Chinese entrepreneurs have joined online communities, the author will also explore how online chatting tools affect Chinese petty entrepreneurship in Nigeria and to what extent this form of communication helps them to cope with their vulnerable situation.

In sum, this paper aims to explore why small-scale Chinese entrepreneurs are vulnerable in the shadow of the states and what strategies they develop to deal with this vulnerability both economically

and socially. Methodologically, I researched petty entrepreneurship between China and Nigeria during four months of multi-sited fieldwork in Guangzhou and Lagos from December 2011 to September 2012. I worked as an assistant to a 44-year-old Chinese businessman named Fei in Guangzhou and conducted participant observation and in-depth interviews with informants based on his business networks. Simultaneously, I joined various online communities where many Chinese businesspeople involved in China–Nigeria business gather virtually and conversed with them extensively. I secured the informed consent of all key informants to disclose the information provided through either interviews or participant observation. The information that is not referenced in this article is based on participant observation. All the names in this article are fictitious in order to guarantee the anonymity of the informants.

## Small Chinese Businesses

In 1971, formal diplomatic ties between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Nigeria were established. Official recognition resulted in an increase in trade and led to numerous aid projects and exchange programmes. In 2006, Nigeria became the first African country to sign a Memorandum of Understanding with China on the establishment of a strategic partnership (Taylor 2007). According to a speech by Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan in Beijing, the value of China–Nigeria trade exceeded 13 billion USD in 2012, while ten years ago it was just 2 billion USD (Aganga 2013).

In many aspects, it seems that China–Nigeria relations on the whole are booming. However, small-scale Chinese entrepreneurs are not experiencing a similar expansion in bilateral relations. They are neither engaged in the oil businesses, which are predominantly operated by Chinese SOEs, nor do they have sufficient capital to enter the well-established free-trade zones. Instead, they take on the risks of transnational business alone and frequently negotiate business directly with local Nigerian agents and clients. Their presence is less visible to both the host and home states.

Chinese migration to Nigeria began in the 1960s after Nigeria gained independence from the United Kingdom. Those early migrants from Hong Kong and Taiwan engaged in enamel-manufacturing, textile and other light industrial production (Li 2000). Mi-

gration from mainland China to Nigeria began following the Chinese economic reform of the late 1970s. In 1999, the Chinese migrant population in Nigeria had reached 5,800, including 630 Taiwanese and 1,050 Hong Kong citizens (*Skyline Monthly* 2006). Mainland Chinese migration increased greatly after 2000. An official Chinese journal stated that, in 2008, there were 50,000 Chinese in Nigeria, with 30,000 of them living in Lagos (Zhuang 2010). However, research informants indicated that the practice of overstaying visas is very common among small-scale Chinese entrepreneurs and that these numbers are therefore underestimated.

The Nigerian commercial environment has opened up in recent years. For instance, in 2004, the Nigerian government originally imposed regulations on the import and sale of foreign textile products, in order to stimulate domestic Nigerian production (Ministry of Commerce, China 2011). In 2010, however, the Nigerian Customs Administration relaxed the prohibition list, and the Nigerian government allowed foreigners to run clothing retail businesses (Maritz 2011).

Despite this, Chinese traders continue to be blamed for “illegal textile-trading” at markets and have even been arrested by Nigerian immigration officials (*BBC News* 2012). Consequently, some small-scale Chinese entrepreneurs store goods in their houses to make their operations look like a wholesale business, and ask Nigerian customers to purchase from their houses. If the quantity of goods is too large to store at home, they rent a warehouse.

Apart from trade in goods, some established Chinese (earlier migrants) now provide services such as documentation, customs clearance and accommodation for more recently arrived Chinese businesspeople on the basis of the capital they have accumulated and the social networks they have established in local society. For newly arrived small-scale Chinese entrepreneurs with scant connections with Nigerian officials, documentation services are important to their success in the Nigerian business environment. There are three main documentation services:

- Visa services: Most Chinese businesspeople are issued business visas for a one-month stay in Nigeria. These can be extended twice, for three months each time. Business visas are issued to businesspeople coming to Nigeria for business negotiations and are not valid for employment; those who want to legally work in

Nigeria usually have to obtain an STR (subject to regularization) visa from the Nigerian embassy in China and get a re-entry visa and a green card from the Nigeria Immigration Service in Nigeria.

- Company registration: According to the Corporate Affairs Commission (CAC) of Nigeria, Chinese businesspeople can register a private company with a minimum share capital of one million NGN (approximately 6,250 USD). The more share capital a company has, the higher the expatriate labour quota it can apply for.
- Expatriate quota application: Once a company is registered in Nigeria, it can assign different positions and hire staff from China; however, this is subject to a limitation on the number of expatriate positions to be approved by the CAC. This quota certificate is a necessary supporting document for applications for re-entry visas and green cards.

Small-scale Chinese entrepreneurs tend to rely on agents to help them to get these documents. There are several reasons for the proliferation of documentation services. First, many small-scale Chinese entrepreneurs do not fully understand English documents that contain professional words and phrases. Thus, they need to rely on skilled agents. Second, they are independent entrepreneurs and most of them lack higher education. They need the necessary supporting documents – for instance, forged company guarantee letters and education certificates – which agents can provide. Third, some of them are involved in illegal business, so they need agents to help them to avoid face-to-face examination as part of their applications. These agents and their practices are involved in institutional corruption and the informal economy of transnational brokerage in Nigeria, which will be elaborated on in subsequent sections.

Another service relating to trade is customs clearance. Chinese agents have to cooperate with Nigerian brokers in this business because customs licences can be assigned only to Nigerians. One Chinese woman named Juan, who has lived in Lagos for six years, runs a customs-clearance business with her Nigerian husband. Normally, she stays at home to promote their business to online Chinese communities, while her husband operates the custom-clearance business outside.

Accommodation is also a profitable service business. Chinese people who visit Nigeria briefly prefer to stay in familiar environments. Based on home-stay accommodation, some businesspeople have developed small hotels targeting Chinese customers. They typically charge 40 to 60 USD per night for accommodation and three meals a day.

The above categorization of small Chinese businesses in Nigeria is based on the accounts of the research informants: trade in goods targeted at Nigerian customers, and service businesses (including documentation services, customs clearance and accommodation services) targeted at Chinese customers. Furthermore, the author found that, apart from documentation services, the other three types of business involve either tangible goods or fixed assets, and are regarded as core businesses by small-scale Chinese entrepreneurs.

So why is the documentation service business distinct? First of all, this type of business is, to a large degree, more likely to involve informal transactions. People using the service do not receive receipts from agents at documentation service businesses. The agents do not pay tax on this type of informal business but profit from their connections with corrupt officials. Second, documentation services do not require investment in fixed assets, while the trading and accommodation service sectors both require substantial investment. This reduces or even circumvents the risks of long-distance transportation of goods and unsound investments in Nigeria. Third, documentation service providers must maintain close relationships with local Nigerian agents and have extensive networks of Chinese clients. So in this sense, this type of business requires more social than economic capital.

The running of a documentation service business is not incompatible with the operation of other types of business. Some Chinese businesspeople do both simultaneously. This is a common practice for transnational small-scale entrepreneurs, such as the Congolese in Paris (MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000: 61–70) and African traders in Hong Kong (Mathews 2011) and Guangzhou (Yang 2011). Considering Hart's (2006: 20) account of the relationship between the formal and informal economy, this practice manifests as "an endless process of separation and integration" of profit-making.

Nevertheless, documentation service provision is often regarded by small-scale Chinese entrepreneurs as a side business. Some of this



study's informants in Nigeria doubted the profitability of document service businesses even though they relied on their agents to extend their visas. The secondary status of documentation services in this case is different from the high social status enjoyed by Cameroonian brokers (Alpes 2012: 104–105).

## The Vulnerability of Chinese Petty Entrepreneurship

Small-scale Chinese entrepreneurs are transnational migrants under the regime of two states: Nigeria as the host nation and China as the country of origin. They are vulnerable in the transnational process. This section identifies three factors that affect vulnerability.

### Everyday Corruption in Nigeria

According to the corruption perception index released in 2012 by Transparency International, an NGO that monitors corporate and political corruption in international development, Nigeria ranks 139th among 176 countries and regions. Corruption manifests itself in Nigeria's political life at nearly every level of government, party politics and electoral processes, as well as in security agencies (Okoosi-Simbine 2011: 157–180). Blundo and Olivier de Sardan (2006: 69–109) elaborate on corrupt practices and strategies in Benin, Niger and Senegal, many of which I also found in the case of Nigeria. Chinese migrants in Nigeria have to deal with corruption within three local authorities: immigration, police and customs.

In Lagos, small-scale Chinese entrepreneurs are often subjected to unexpected visa and passport checks by Nigerian officials. Officers from the directorate of investigation of the Nigeria Immigration Service sometimes work undercover. Sometimes the Chinese overstay their visas and are arrested, but Nigerian immigration officials imply that immigrants who have overstayed can be released if they pay a “fine”.

Thus, the primary strategy adopted by the Chinese in order to cope with Nigerian immigration officials is to avoid meeting them, especially during times when immigration controls are stricter. If they are “unfortunately” inspected by Nigerian immigration officials, the best course of action is to negotiate a price as soon as they are

stopped. Zhang, a Chinese trader who has conducted transnational business in Nigeria for nearly ten years, said:

If you dash [“bribe” in the Nigerian context] on the spot, you can be set free immediately; if you are taken into a car, the price might be doubled. If you have been sent to the immigration offices, you will definitely spend much more (Anonymous 1 2012).

The immigration officials’ practice can be seen as a “commission paid for illicit service” (Blundo and Olivier de Sardan 2006: 73–74). The transaction is negotiable, and the legitimacy is highly ambivalent.

The police also exercise corrupt practices. Some Chinese informants complained that the police often stopped their cars and found faults with them. The Chinese believed that the police were prepared to just kill time until they were willing to pay. One clothing shop owner complained: “If you go out late, you will be assailed by the police; if you get up early you may encounter bandits. What a society!”

The police’s practice can be seen as an “unwarranted fee for a public service” (Blundo and Olivier de Sardan 2006: 73–74), which is either a negotiated transaction or extortion. As Smith (2007: 61–63) put it, “The most notorious and popularly recognized symbol of everyday corruption [in Nigeria] is the roadside police checkpoint”.

The third authority is customs, which examines both goods going in and out of Nigeria. Customs officers sometimes stop inbound travellers and ask for money, but always after asking to open their luggage and scrutinize the items inside. I, myself, was urged to pay for a bag of “illegal” sausage when I went through customs at Murtala Muhammed International Airport (the major airport serving Lagos) on 1 July 2012. I also witnessed a Chinese lady paying a “dash” of 2,000 NGN for a bag of a particular Nigerian food item, which in fact was not on the export prohibition list, but small-scale Chinese entrepreneurs rarely pay attention to what the real regulations are, so are easily duped.

Corruption in Nigeria is practised not only by state officials but also by ordinary people. The case described below took place in the neighbourhood where I was staying. On 27 July 2012, my housemates in Lagos, named Hong and Zhang, arranged for a 40-foot container of imported furniture to be unloaded, and they hired local porters to move the furniture to the basement of their house. When the porters had almost finished unloading, a group of young Nigerians came to

interrupt their work. They claimed that they were a youth association on the estate and that Hong and Zhang should pay them for unloading goods in the area. The two sides quarrelled for three hours until the chief of the estate committee arrived. The so-called “youth association” turned out to be an autonomous organization consisting of some young residents of the estate which had not been approved by the committee. In addition to this case, the author also heard that every time a Chinese businessperson wanted to move goods from warehouses in the Alaba Market to another place, they had to pay money to the locals (Anonymous 2 2012).

Studying corruption provides a useful lens for understanding the effects of the state. Sometimes, the state is both a shadow and real: Political authorities grab interests and accumulate wealth through the informal economy (Reno 2009); state-sanctioned predation also leaves petty capitalist growth relatively unregulated (Nonini 2005: 167–200). In Nigeria, corruption is an everyday phenomenon and regarded as a “culture” (Smith 2007). The everyday practice of corruption in Nigeria makes Chinese petty entrepreneurship vulnerable in many ways.

## Self-interested Chinese Communities and the Indifferent Chinese State

Through living and interacting with agents of the Nigerian state, small-scale Chinese entrepreneurs are relevant to the Chinese state, which is represented by the Chinese embassy and consulate in Nigeria. However, small-scale Chinese entrepreneurs are vulnerable to the inability or unwillingness of the Chinese state to support and care for them in times of difficulty, even when this difficulty has arisen from the lack of trust and atmosphere of self-interest that pervades the Chinese business community abroad.

The lives of small Chinese entrepreneurs in Nigeria are filled with, in addition to the problem of everyday corruption and the other challenges of acclimating to the local environment, the need to continuously calculate one’s own and others’ self-interests. To that end, below I have provided an example of interpersonal relations in a transnational partnership. The Chinese businessman named Fei (introduced earlier in the article) met Hong, a furniture businessman, in an online community. Fei then introduced Hong to his brother-in-law, Zhang, with a view to forming a business partnership. The three

made an agreement: Zhang would help Hong to make his way to Lagos and would provide him with accommodation there. Meanwhile, Fei, though based in Guangzhou, would be responsible for introducing Nigerian clients to Hong in Lagos. In return, Hong would allocate 10 per cent of his sales revenue to each Zhang and Fei. However, once Hong arrived in Lagos, he discovered that there was great potential in the Nigerian markets. After settling into life in Lagos with Zhang's help, he gradually started to venture out to the markets with his Nigerian driver, but without Zhang, whom he left at their shared accommodation. Zhang complained:

He [Hong] never told me how many pieces of furniture would be shipped here, how much he sells, and how much money he has got back from buyers. Indeed, I hold a 10 per cent share, but what if he tells me that he only gets a hundred thousand naira but actually he gets a million naira? (Anonymous 3 2012).

Distrusting Hong, Zhang asked Fei to start up a new business and warned that Hong was not reliable, even though he was willing to remain in the partnership and cooked meals for Hong every day as his housemate. Meanwhile, Fei was unwilling to send new goods to Zhang from Guangzhou because he did not trust Zhang not to take all the profits while he was still in Guangzhou.

From this example, it is evident that even when Chinese businesspeople establish partnerships, an atmosphere of suspicion and doubt exists, and all sides are wary of each other for fear that the other party might exploit their own self-interests. Generally speaking, once a conflict arises between two parties and the business relationship sours, it is likely that business partners might never meet again. For instance, since their partnership ended, Zhang has hardly seen his previous boss, who brought him to Nigeria. In addition, most senior businesspeople tend to be cautious and mistrustful of their younger Chinese translators or assistants. This phenomenon contradicts the popular image of united Chinese communities overseas (Hsu 2007) and the function of Chinese "trust" networks (Gadzala 2010).

Furthermore, with regard to everyday corruption in Nigeria, some Chinese migrants even go so far as to inform against their compatriots, for instance by telling Nigerian immigration officials the whereabouts of their fellow Chinese so that the officials can elicit bribes from them. I heard of a Chinese businessman being inspected on 11 July 2012 at his residence, which was at a secret location that

the Nigerian authorities had not known about. Subsequently, some Chinese said that they believed that this information could “only have been revealed by his [fellow] Chinese”. Thus, the disunity of Chinese businesspeople in Nigeria aggravates their vulnerability.

Normally, when Chinese migrant entrepreneurs have a business dispute with their fellow nationals or feel distressed in an unfavourable social environment, they can seek advice and help from the Chinese embassy or consulate: the only representatives of the Chinese state in a foreign country. However, the Chinese embassy and consulate in Nigeria were widely criticized by small-scale Chinese entrepreneurs. Some complained about the inability of the consulate to protect its citizens from extortion by the Nigerian authorities. Even though some praised certain staff in the consulate for their willingness to help during emergencies, overall they were not completely satisfied with the consulate’s attitude to small-scale Chinese entrepreneurs. One businessman said that he had had a dispute with his Nigerian partner, so he went to the consulate to ask them to mediate; however, he was berated by a member of the consulate staff, who blamed him for the dispute before the businessman had the chance to clarify what had happened to his business. The businessman told me, “I felt outraged. People say that the Chinese consulate is our mother abroad. [But] if we had such mother, I would rather break off the relationship”. The situation is similar to that in Cape Verde (Haugen and Carling 2005: 650).

Despite the fact that small-scale Chinese entrepreneurs are likely to be ignored by the Chinese state, they still depend on clement macro-relations between China and Nigeria as the foundation of their businesses. Once, Juan told a Chinese restaurant owner that the Nigerian presidents of several commercial associations had been gathering to discuss a way to drive the Chinese out of Nigerian markets. But the Chinese restaurant owner did not take it seriously and responded, “It’s impossible. Nigeria dare not turn against China. See how many Chinese there are in Nigeria”.

Small-scale Chinese entrepreneurs are quite aware of their inability to influence state relations and also have no expectations that their Nigerian counterparts will have any influence on Nigeria–China relations. Even though they are unhappy with the Chinese authorities in Nigeria, they rely on the Chinese state’s interaction with the Nigerian government for overall guidance and direction, especially having

witnessed China's retreat from Libya in 2011, which indicated the Chinese state's concern for Chinese migrants abroad. This difference in Chinese entrepreneurs' attitudes to the Chinese government at the state level and its bureaucratic arm at the local level is similar to the Chinese people's faith in the central government and simultaneous scepticism of and dissatisfaction with local government (Xiang 2010). By comparison, Indian entrepreneurs in East Africa do not manifest distinct attitudes towards the state and the local authorities, even though some recently arrived entrepreneurs might complain about the Indian government's scant attention to their businesses in the region (Gadzala 2011: 103).

## Dynamic China–Nigeria Relations

The seeming irrelevance of the multi-layered state-to-state relations to small Chinese entrepreneurs' lives in Nigeria is disproven by several incidents that have caused tensions between China and Nigeria, as described in this section.

On 15 May 2012, the Beijing government announced that it would deal seriously with foreigners in China who had breached immigration rules by taking action against the so-called *sanfei* (三非, the “three illegals”: illegal entry, illegal residence and illegal employment) (*Beijing Morning* 2012). Later on, some other local governments also implemented similar policies towards foreigners in their areas. Then, on 22 May 2012, in a seemingly tit-for-tat action, Nigerian immigration officials arrested nearly 100 Chinese immigrants in Kano and Lagos (Ehiabhi 2012). The Chinese embassy in Abuja and the Chinese consulate in Lagos immediately held talks with the Nigerian authorities about this matter (*International Online* 2012).

China–Nigeria relations became quite tense during that period, as visa policies were tightened on both sides. Nigerian officials regularly checked Chinese passports on the street or in Chinese companies. The media spotlight on the situation intensified when Mr. Emmanuel Ifeadi, director of the immigration office in Kano, described petty Chinese traders as “scavengers” who were taking away jobs from Nigerians (*BBC News* 2012). In response, the Chinese government became stricter about issuing visas to Nigerians to enter China. Relations deteriorated further after an incident on 18 June 2012, in which a Nigerian man died at a police station in Guangzhou after getting into a fight with a Chinese motorcyclist and being turned over

to the police. The following day, a public demonstration by a group of approximately 100 Africans in Guangzhou brought traffic to a standstill. The Nigerian embassy in Beijing asked the authorities to hand over the Nigerian's body so that they could conduct their own investigation into the cause of death, but the request was refused by the Chinese government (Zhou 2012). The author's Chinese informants in Lagos said that this incident led to some small-scale protests against the Chinese presence in Nigeria.

Thus, any variation in state relations may give rise to a chain reaction. Furthermore, Chinese policy towards Africans in China is linked to Nigerian policy towards Chinese in Nigeria. One junior Nigerian immigration official said that the arrests in May resulted from a bilateral agreement:

Our minister went to China and complained that some Chinese businesspeople overstayed their visas and engaged in illegal transactions. Then, your [the Chinese] minister said, "If they really break the law, you should arrest them".

This narrative, to some extent, reflects a correlation between the two states' policies, though some officials denied any direct causality.

Variations in visa policy affect the transnational mobility of petty entrepreneurs. The increasing cost of overstaying a visa makes them re-calculate their profit margins. Frequent travel between Nigeria and China increases their financial burden, so they attempt to extend their visas for as long as possible to cut travel costs. Business visas can be extended twice for 90 days each time, though some agents claimed that they could make a third extension while others denied that this was possible. Direct questioning of an immigration officer revealed another picture when he said, "It's very difficult to get the third extension unless the minister has approved it". This uncertainty around visa extensions aggravates the vulnerability of small-scale Chinese businesspeople.

The sometimes extreme local response to the Chinese presence in Nigeria, caused by widely publicized events such as the death of the Nigerian businessman in Guangzhou, also affects small-scale Chinese entrepreneurs' everyday business. The protests in Lagos just after the Guangzhou incident caused some Chinese shops to close for a period, and Chinese people were advised by their friends to stay indoors.

Thus, changing state relations between China and Nigeria also make small-scale Chinese entrepreneurs vulnerable. By contrast, bilateral trade agreements (especially regarding China's import of oil from Nigeria) and the development of free-trade zones have little relevance to them, and they have barely benefitted from the China–Nigeria strategic partnership. However, incidents like the Nigerian death in Guangzhou or the promulgation of new policies relating to Nigeria have a greater significance, and small entrepreneurs pay attention to the details of such events. They are quite aware of interstate connections and vulnerable to the impact of these connections.

It is worth mentioning the role of the state in relation to the vulnerability of Chinese petty entrepreneurship. On the one hand, corruption, as a form of informal economy, exists under states' unregulated control (Roitman 2005); on the other hand, tightened regulations in response to dynamic interstate relations are also implemented by the Nigerian state. This fits within the paradox of state control (Portes and Haller 2005: 409–413). The local Chinese state, the consulate in this case, fails to be received favourably by small-scale Chinese entrepreneurs and does nothing about their vulnerable situation.

In Nigeria, corruption practised by both state authorities and ordinary people also puts Chinese petty entrepreneurship in a weak position. The disunity of the migrant Chinese communities in Nigeria further aggravates the vulnerability of individuals. Chinese migration from mainland China to Nigeria only began in the 1980s and it does not have the same historical foundation as the ethnic Chinese enclaves in South Africa (Yap and Man 1996; Park 2009). The diverse migrant population does not help them to develop communities based on township, such as the Shunde community in Zanzibar (Hsu 2007). Moreover, individuals' distant relationships with the Chinese state gives rise to the one-way impact of the state. Many small-scale entrepreneurs complained about the unresponsiveness of the embassy and the consulate. This is largely because the day-to-day problems encountered by these migrant businesspeople are scarcely recognized by the Chinese state, which only intervenes in large-scale or major incidents.

To sum up, on the one hand, small-scale Chinese entrepreneurs in Nigeria suffer from tensions between China and Nigeria arising from widely publicized, major events. Even though the incident in Guangzhou took place thousands of kilometres away from their resi-



dences in Lagos, Chinese migrants' businesses were partially affected by the local response to the event and the stricter Nigerian regulations that preceded it. On the other hand, these individuals rely on ongoing and productive interaction between the two countries. Conceptually, they believe that a powerful China is the backbone of their business in Nigeria. Although they suffer from the ebb and flow of dynamic state relations, they do not expect that Nigeria might turn against China, and they assume that China–Nigeria links will be maintained. These assumptions are embedded in their everyday narratives and their sensitivity towards international affairs.

## The Emergence of Economic and Social Informality

The vulnerability of Chinese petty entrepreneurship does not equate to a total inability to deal with Nigeria's corruption, the self-interests of their compatriot community and dynamic state relations. In fact, small-scale Chinese entrepreneurs actively interact with Nigerian nationals in informal sectors, and are thus indebted to that very corruption. Simultaneously, online chat room interaction becomes an alternative means of communication within the transnational Chinese community.

### Documentation Services: The Emergence of Economic Informality

Although small-scale Chinese entrepreneurs suffer from everyday corruption in Nigeria, some of them benefit from business opportunities through cooperation with corrupt Nigerian officials. This section will discuss the three main service businesses operated by the Chinese to help their compatriot businesspeople obtain vital documents in Nigeria: visa applications and extensions, company registrations and expatriate quota applications.

The first, the documentation service business, deals with visa applications and extensions. As mentioned above, many small-scale Chinese entrepreneurs are afraid to meet Nigerian immigration officials face-to-face. They prefer to negotiate immigration issues indirectly via a Chinese agent, who generally, but not always, relies on a Nigerian agent to approach immigration officials. Table 1 gives a

comparison of the rates charged by three different agents for various visa issues.

**Table 1: Comparison of Agent Fees (in NGN)**

Item	Agent 1	Agent 2	Agent 3
Business visa: first extension	20,000 (Abuja) 10,000 (Lagos)	70,000	15,000
Business visa: second extension	40,000	70,000	30,000
Business visa: third extension	45,000	To be checked	Impossible
Re-entry visa and green card	120,000	150,000	130,000

**Note:** Currency is Nigerian naira (160 NGN: 1 USD, as July 2012). Currently, businesspeople seeking visa extensions are encouraged to have them processed in Abuja, as the Lagos Immigration Office has a reputation for being unreliable.

**Source:** Author's own compilation.

The prices are quite divergent on account of each agent's connection with Nigerian officials: Agent 1 is a Nigerian trader who has a long-time partnership with both Nigerian officials and Chinese clients; Agent 2 is a Nigerian policeman's wife who has to rely on her husband's friends in the Immigration Office; and while Agent 3 is himself an immigration official, his status is quite junior, so he is not directly in charge of visa approval. Some Nigerian agents – for instance, Agents 1 and 2 – act as middlemen between Chinese agents and Nigerian officials; consequently, they charge more than Agent 3.

Not all migrant Chinese rely on agents, whether Chinese or Nigerian, in order to negotiate visa issues. For instance, some large Chinese companies in Nigeria have long-established direct connections with immigration officers. The staff of these companies are, to some degree, exempt from immigration officials' investigations. A member of staff at a private company in Abuja told me that the senior managers of Chinese companies pass through airport customs controls with the escort of Nigerian officials.

Furthermore, not all small-scale Chinese entrepreneurs rely on Nigerian agents to handle their visa business. The case of Zhao and Ade, described below, indicates that small Chinese brokers can ap-

proach immigration officers without the aid of a Nigerian agent. Zhao, the owner of a Chinese store, recognized Ade, a Nigerian officer in the criminal investigation department, when Zhao was being arrested for overstaying his visa. After his release, Zhao established a visa business partnership with Ade. Zhao regularly collects passports from Chinese migrants and sends them to his partner Ade for visa extensions. This is an unusual way to establish business connections with immigration officials, but it is an example of the hard-won social capital that is so necessary in the documentation service business.

From Table 1, it is evident that most visa agents deal with business-visa extensions, because the STR visa (working visa) has to be applied for at the Nigerian embassy in China, so its application and processing requires transnational connections. However, Ade specializes in processing STR visas for Chinese businesspeople in Nigeria. He mails the client's passport to the Nigerian embassy in Beijing, and then gets it back stamped at the airport. The Chinese customer only needs to provide two photos and the appropriate fee to be spared the worry and effort of gathering the documentation normally needed to apply for the STR visa. The price of this service package is 300,000 NGN (1,875 USD). Ade and Zhao receive dozens of passports through Zhao's social network every week. This case demonstrates the transnational brokerage network in the visa business.

The second type of documentation business deals with company registration. In order to be legally employed with an STR visa, Chinese businesspeople need to hold a position of employment within a registered company in Nigeria. The aim of registering a company is not always to expand business; sometimes it is done simply to legitimize Chinese business activities in Nigeria and to earn the trust of customers and partners. The drafting of the documents required for registration necessitates interaction between Chinese and Nigerians.

Normally, the process of company registration is done via an agent. Nigerian agents help the Chinese businessperson to draft the documents required and to submit them to the CAC. They know how to elaborate on the details of the company in accordance with the law and to incorporate items that may be useful in the future, as was the case in the following example involving a Chinese–Nigerian joint-venture company. In 2012, Fei and his Nigerian partner Udo had just registered their technical company, but on the company registration documents, the business scope went far beyond what would

normally fall under the remit of a technical company. According to its charter, the company was established

- “to work, manage and maintain telecommunication systems [...]”,
- “to carry on the supply of communications equipment [...]”,
- “to carry on the business of oil-drilling, prospecting, and refining [...]”,
- “to carry on the business of agro-allied farming, agriculture, animal husbandry [...]”,
- “to carry on all the business of wholesale and retail sales of general goods [...]”, and
- “to carry on the business of clearing and forwarding goods [...]”.

The last two objectives cited above also appeared in another company document, which focused on the furniture business.

The fee for registering a private company with share capital of one million NGN through an agent was around 80,000 NGN (500 USD) (Anonymous 4 2012); however, according to the CAC website, the cost of registering a foreign or joint-venture company was only 10,000 NGN (62.50 USD), which implies that agents might make a huge profit.

One way round the company registration process for joint-venture companies is if the partners are married. Thus, interethnic marriage is seen as an alternative method of reducing the risks of a Chinese–Nigerian partnership. Generally, they do not have to register the joint-venture company, but base their business on the division of labour within families. For instance, in the case of the customs clearance business operated by the Chinese businesswoman named Juan mentioned earlier, the company was registered in the name of her Nigerian husband, while Juan took charge of promoting their business within the Chinese expatriate community. However, romantic relationships alone between Chinese women and Nigerian businessmen are less stable and reliable than marriage. Without a marital contract and familial obligation, business partnerships based on romance are more likely to break up.

The third type of documentation business deals with expatriate quota applications. If a company in Nigeria wants to employ a staff member from China, the manager must design a position for the non-local, foreign staff and apply for an expatriate quota with the

Citizenship and Business Department of the Nigerian Ministry of the Interior. The approval of the expatriate quota is essential when applying for an STR (working) visa for Chinese staff members. Unlike company registrations, expatriate quotas are more strictly controlled. A company with share capital of 10 million NGN may have a maximum allowance of 20 non-local members of staff, but sometimes the authorities will only approve five or six such positions. Udo and Fei applied for a quota of four non-local positions in July 2012, but had not received a response from the authorities after two months. A Nigerian lawyer named Charles told me that it usually takes six to eight weeks for expatriate employee quota examinations to be processed, but that the last case he dealt with took 12 weeks (Anonymous 5 2012).

The positions for which quotas are applied for can be designated in various ways. Zhang's telephone company has four expatriate quota positions: the managing director, the quality assurance manager, the systems control analyst and the factory manager. The titles given are only used in the application as, in reality, Chinese businesspeople only care about the number of approved expatriate positions. For positions of technical expertise, applicants need to provide qualifications, which can be forged by agents.

The price of expatriate quota applications is much higher than that of company registration. Taking Udo and Fei's company as an example, they had to pay 450,000 NGN (2,812.50 USD) to apply for a quotas of four. Charles, the Nigerian lawyer, charged 500,000 NGN (3,125 USD) for a quota of five, which is the minimum quota number he deals with. For each quota for an additional person, he charges an extra 100,000 NGN (625 USD). He said:

I can promise that a quota of at least five will be approved; something that not every agent can do, because I have connections to the CAC (Anonymous 5 2012).

Once the quota is approved, the company is required to pay a small sum of money to renew the quota every two years. However, some small-scale entrepreneurs cannot afford to employ their full quota of Chinese employees, so their excess Chinese manpower quota is often sold illegally to anyone wanting to apply for an STR visa to come to Nigeria to work. To this end, agents can be paid to forge the relevant documents to prove the applicant's relevance to the company. Furthermore, expatriate quotas can also be used to open a private bank

account in Nigeria. According to Nigerian law, only foreigners with green cards are allowed to open a bank account. Thus, Chinese businesspeople who are in Nigeria with just a business visa may decide to exploit an expatriate quota position in order to open a bank account by claiming that they are in the process of applying for a green card.

In summary, documentation service businesses could not exist without strategized interethnic interaction between Chinese and Nigerians. Corruption in Nigeria, whether practised by Nigerian officials or by ordinary Nigerians as agents, facilitates economic informality in the transnational process. The documents provided by the service businesses are necessary for Chinese businesspeople who are migrating to Nigeria and who want to do business in a Nigerian context.

Generally, small-scale Chinese entrepreneurs focus more on economic interests than political relations between countries. But the visa business involves politics and policy documents, which act as vehicles to control mobility. The brokerage of visa operations undermines the states' border control and creates a liminal space where strategized interethnic interactions can take place.

However, these individual actors do not aim to change state relations at the macro-level. The informal economy of documentation services protects small-scale Chinese entrepreneurs from the negative impacts of tightened state regulations and interstate connections. If it is difficult to get a reliable visa extension in Lagos, agents will seek connections in Abuja or elsewhere. Some agents have developed a brokerage network for service businesses where official national documents are for sale. In this sense, formal state relations are informalized by the complicity between Chinese and Nigerian agents.

## Cyberspace: The Emergence of Social Informality

In recent years, the Internet has become an increasingly popular tool in facilitating transnational business networking between traders in the home country and traders in the diaspora. QQ, an instant messaging tool, is extremely popular among Chinese small-scale entrepreneurs in both China and Nigeria. A QQ group is a chat room that people may only enter with the permission of the group's founder and administrators.

Some researchers have examined Chinese perspectives on Africa and Africans based on open online forums which are frequented by many people who have never been to Africa (Shen 2009; Cheng

2011). Therefore, my research on online communities that incorporate Chinese businesspeople in both China and Nigeria adds another dimension to the study of China–Nigeria links.

Reputation and popularity vary in different QQ groups. When the word “Nigeria” was searched as a keyword in the QQ system, almost 100 QQ groups came up with membership in excess of 100 people. The largest group includes nearly 2,000 members. The administrators of this particular group regularly chat and even raise topics for discussion, such as experiences of life in Nigeria, major recent events, and new policies on international trade. Moreover, they protect the QQ group from being attacked by hackers. If a member sends a suspicious website link to the group, the administrators will warn the other members and may even expel the culprit.

Compared to everyday interaction within the Chinese communities in Nigeria, communication within the QQ groups is rather informal: Group members may not know each other, but they do not have to be cautious about verbal etiquette; even if they do know each other, they are less likely to become involved in conflicts of interest. Efforts to protect one’s own self-interests are, to some extent, reduced in the “culture of real virtuality” (Castells 1996, 2001). The sociability of online communication is much characterized by relatively egalitarian relations and the informal nature of interaction (Misztal 2000: 197), though face-to-face interaction also involves informal actions.

The social informality of the transnational online community has three ways of overcoming the vulnerability of Chinese petty entrepreneurship in Nigeria. The first is information exchange. This information is not only limited to business opportunities, but also includes predictions about dynamic interstate connections. For instance, when Nigerian immigration officials began to arrest Chinese in Nigerian markets in May 2012, QQ group members used the chat room to inform each other about where the immigration officers were going, and even suggested that their members stay indoors.

There is always heated discussion in the QQ groups about various high-profile or newsworthy events. The discussants often try to predict the consequences of the events and, what is more, the potential impact the events may have on their businesses and everyday lives. The forum users also criticized the Chinese government’s new entry/ exit laws towards foreigners when it was reported that the

*sanfei* foreigners who have been deported would not be allowed to re-enter China for ten years (*China News* 2012). Many small-scale Chinese entrepreneurs believe that the stricter the Chinese government is on Africans in China, the tougher the Chinese migrants' lives will be in Nigeria.

The second strategy of small-scale Chinese businesspeople to overcome their vulnerability is to diversify the discourse on corruption in Nigeria. Even though everyday corruption in Nigeria is notorious, some small-scale Chinese entrepreneurs benefit from the informal economy of the documentation service business. Thus, Chinese businesspeople are ambivalent about the culture of corruption. In the online community, some newly arrived Chinese businessmen related their experience of being extorted by the Nigerian authorities and reminded other QQ group members not to make similar mistakes. Some more senior Chinese businessmen shared their strategies for coping with corrupt officials. These narratives diversify perceptions of Nigeria's society and culture, especially by local entrepreneurs in China, who often regard Africa as being in turmoil.

The third way in which the social informality of the transnational online community supports petty entrepreneurs in Nigeria is by offering help and consolation, and by providing a platform for grievances to be aired. Since many small-scale Chinese entrepreneurs are dissatisfied with the Chinese consulate's arrogance and indifference, they often provide their fellow QQ group members with advice and assistance. One Chinese businesswoman in Guangzhou had her cargo sent to an incorrect address in Lagos, but did not have any staff there to fetch the goods. After she expressed her anxiety in the QQ group chat room, Fei asked his partner Udo to take the goods to the right address.

Cyberspace develops the function of cohesion that the Chinese embassy and consulate cannot achieve. It avoids calculated face-to-face interactions among Chinese businesspeople in Nigeria. Sometimes, their fragmented narratives and conversations in the online communities are more helpful than their cautious communications with their Chinese partners, who live with them in Nigeria.

Ironically, the states sometimes need individuals to contribute social capital. For instance, I found that Chinese diplomatic officials would seek out opinion leaders in the online communities and use them to spread information and convey announcements. Due to the



shortage of trusted people on the ground, the Chinese consulate depends on the opinion leaders within groups of independent Chinese entrepreneurs when they want to gather people for meetings. Likewise, the authorities in mainland China also needed Fei's informal connections in Nigeria to deal with the death of the Nigerian in Guangzhou. This evidences the stratification of small-scale Chinese entrepreneurs based on their accumulation of social capital, which is similar to their situation in Namibia (Dobler 2009).

Private online communities, unlike open Internet forums, endow their members with a sense of solidarity. These online networks become "forms of specialized communities" (Castells 2001: 132). Since they are situated in the context of China–Nigeria business, their sociability is constructed around specific interests, but they are not completely involved in a formal network of business interests.

Both economic and social informalities are interactional strategies employed by small-scale Chinese entrepreneurs: The former is characterized by interethnic interaction between Chinese and Nigerians; the latter is typified by informal intraethnic interaction within transnational Chinese communities. These strategized interactions help small-scale Chinese entrepreneurs overcome their vulnerability when faced with everyday corruption in Nigeria, their lives in self-interested communities without the support and concern of the Chinese state, and dynamic interstate relations.

To some extent, social informality promotes economic informality. Since many documentation service businesses are semi-legal or illegal businesses, their advertisements have to be distributed informally. Cyberspace becomes an ideal place to advertise such businesses. The author found some QQ groups specializing in visa documentation, where visa agents gather virtually to share information and their experiences of evading state regulations.

However, cyberspace cannot substitute formal interactional modes, such as family networks, township connections and *guanxi* (关系, interpersonal relationships). As with the link between the formal and informal economy, formal and informal sociability are also juxtaposed in this case (Misztal 2000). Considering the triangular partnership between business partners Fei, Zhang and Hong, Fei and Zhang as in-laws are members of the same extended family, while Fei met Hong via the Internet. Even though the importance of the Internet has grown in recent years, it "sustains the bonds of community by

complementing, not replacing, other channels of interaction” (Di-Maggio et al. 2001: 318).

## Conclusion

This article has explored the informal practices used by small-scale Chinese entrepreneurs to cope with their exposed situation in the shadow of the states. The burgeoning bilateral interactions between China and Nigeria mask the vulnerability of transnational Chinese petty entrepreneurship, which results from three factors in the states’ regimes.

Small-scale Chinese entrepreneurs are faced with everyday corruption in Nigeria, practised by both Nigerian authorities, such as immigration, police and customs officials, and ordinary Nigerian people. The self-interest of members of the Chinese expatriate community in Nigeria without the protection of the state aggravates this vulnerability. Moreover, variations in state policies due to dynamic state relations exert huge influence on the business and everyday lives of Chinese small-scale entrepreneurs.

To cope with their weak position, small-scale Chinese entrepreneurs strategize their interactions with both Nigerian and Chinese nationals. Informality is a characteristic of such economic and social interactions. Portes and Haller (2005: 407) emphasize that the informal economy is “dependent on social ties for its effective functioning”. Likewise, Hart (2006: 33) also mentions social norms that “have emerged to organize the informal economy”. Thus, the integration of economic and social informalities in this article fits with these statements.

Economic informality is especially embodied in the documentation service businesses. This informal sector is a space where legality becomes ambiguous and border control by the two states is relatively weak. For instance, in the visa business, these official documents, which should have been a tool of border control, are informally transacted. Strictly speaking, this business breaks laws, but it prospers because the state lacks the capacity and will to regulate appropriately. In the informal sector, people can obtain a visa even if they lack the necessary supporting documents. In other words, activities in the informal sector accelerate the mobility of people and goods and undermine state border controls.

Social informality is based on cyberspace. Interaction on the Internet among Chinese small-scale entrepreneurs helps them cope with fluctuations of macro-interstate links and develop a sense of community. Simultaneously, online communities facilitate the economic informality of documentation services. In using these services, small-scale Chinese entrepreneurs reduce transaction costs and ensure their regular mobility even if they live in self-interested communities.

However, the informalities should not be exaggerated. The informalization of state regulations does not mean that small-scale Chinese entrepreneurs' activities in the informal sector can affect state relations and policies. They just aim to overcome their vulnerability in the shadow of the states rather than to alter the macro-situation. In the Chinese small businesses in Nigeria, formal practices, such as trade in goods, and informal practices, such as documentation services, are juxtaposed in a "continuum" (Guha-Khasnabis, Kanbur, and Ostrom 2006). The practices of informalization facilitate individual businesses when dynamic state relations inhibit personal transnational mobility.

Also, informal social networking on the Internet does not mean that traditional Chinese interpersonal interactions will be completely altered. Online communication tools offer an alternative way to develop new interactional strategies and facilitate an appropriate balance between the informality and formality of interaction (Misztal 2000). However, how this technology and new form of sociability impact transnational petty entrepreneurship between China and Africa remains to be explored.

Exploring informalities offers insights into China's engagement with Africa. Existing literature has emphasized the potential of the informal economy (Neuwirth 2011) and of the Internet (Castells 1996) in shaping societies and individual lives. This article integrates both into a framework of economic and social informalities in the context of Chinese petty entrepreneurship in Nigeria. Along with formal links established and maintained by both Chinese and Nigerian institutions, the small-scale Chinese entrepreneurs' practices, which are relatively secret and extremely dynamic, contribute to shaping the Chinese–Nigerian relationship.

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## Appendix

### Key Informants with Whom the Author Conducted No Formal Interviews

- Ade, a Nigerian official in Lagos
- Charles, a Nigerian lawyer in Lagos
- Fei, a male Chinese trader from Jiangxi
- Hong, a male Chinese trader from Jiangxi; Fei's business partner
- Juan, a Chinese businesswoman from Northeast China; married to a Nigerian businessman
- Udo, a male Nigerian trader in Lagos
- Zhang, a male Chinese trader from Henan; Fei's brother-in-law
- Zhao, a male Chinese shop owner from Shandong; Ade's business partner



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