Introduction: Chinese in Africa*

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Guest Editors

Media representations of China and Chinese people in Africa are often confused and increasingly negative as China and various African states’ governments mutually agree to strengthen relations through economic deals in spite of Western critiques of neo-colonialism and disregard for human rights. Rumors of Chinese companies using Chinese convict or slave labor can be found in most African countries with even a small Chinese presence. China is accused of sending its excess population to Africa to resolve the problem of overcrowding, pillaging Africa’s natural resources to service its own developments, and engaging in poor labor as well as environmental practices. Not least of all, Chinese companies are blamed for dumping low-cost and low-quality (or “cheap”) commodities in African markets. In other words, the overwhelming view is that African states and African people are being exploited and victimized by the latter.

Hand-in-hand with these allegations, estimates of the numbers of Chinese peoples in various African countries are greatly exaggerated, augmenting fears of a Chinese “invasion” and unfair market competition. Events in Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Lesotho over the last few years indicate that Chinese people have become targets of anti-Chinese sentiment, often led by opposition political parties or civil society groups, for different ends.

As engagement between African countries and China continues to deepen and broaden in myriad ways, most media coverage and scholarly studies continue to focus primarily on the economic and political aspects of Chinese

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activities in Africa. Little still has been written about the people-to-people
counters that occur in tandem with the high-level negotiations and private
entrepreneurial transactions on the continent. Rumors, speculation and mis-
perceptions run rampant, in part, because very little of what has appeared,
even in academic journals and books, has been based on in-depth, empirical
research in the field, although this is gradually starting to change. The
discourse on Africa-China, just as speculations of the meaning of China’s politi-
cal and economic rise on the world stage, has largely been framed by
superficial understandings of Western capitalist expansion and exploitation.
Real concerns about China’s domestic political record, in particular concerns
about human rights and environmental abuses, combined with the western
nations’ concerns about their diminishing power in Africa, tend to color all
things Chinese, resulting in the propagations of these distorted images.

The Chinese in Africa/Africans in China (CA/AC) International Research
Working Group established in late 2007, was formed by a small group of
scholars engaged in empirical research on various groups of Chinese peoples
in different African countries, with the aim of filling some of these knowl-
edge gaps and correcting misconceptions that have obscured social realities.
Over the past several years, the group has expanded to include more scholars
and researchers around the globe, engaged in similar research, both in Africa
as well as in China. The papers in this special issue are a small selection of
those presented at a small conference held in August 2009.

Conference papers covered Chinese migrants in Angola, Cape Verde,
Democratic Republic Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Lesotho, Mali, Mauritius,
Mozambique, Namibia, Senegal, South Africa, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimba-
bwe. Several conference papers also examined immigration to China more
broadly, with a couple of papers examining African migrants and asylum
seekers in Guangzhou and Hong Kong, in particular. The articles in this spe-
cial issue are a narrow selection of all the papers presented at this conference.

1 See, for example, China and Africa: Volume 9: Emerging Patterns in Globalization and
Development (The China Quarterly Special Issues) 2010; Brautigan, Deborah…; Monson,
Jamie… Park, YJ 2010 “Résidents temporaires ou permanents? Migration chinoise contempo-
“Carling, Jorgen and Heidi Østbo Haugen 2005 “On the Edge of the Chinese Diaspora: the
Surge of Baihuo Business in an African City.” Ethnic and Racial Studies 28 (4):639-662; Park,
Yoon Jung and Anna Ying Chen 2009 “Recent Chinese migrations in small towns of post-
apartheid South Africa” in Revue Européene des Migrations Internationales (REMI), 25 (1):25-44;
Park, Yoon Jung 2009a “Recent Chinese Migrations to South Africa: New Intersections of
Race, Class & Ethnicity in Representation, Expression and Identity Interdisciplinary Perspectives.
Migrations, No 1279 (May-June) (in French), pp. 126-139.