

Review: The Suitors - Chinese in Africa

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Review: *Buy China's Second Continent: How a Million Migrants Are Building a New Empire in Africa* by Howard French. Knopf, 285 pp, £22.50, June 2014, ISBN 978 0 307 95698 9

In 1969, three years into the Cultural Revolution, China was not only poorer than most African countries but suffering from a massive famine. Mao Zedong and his colleagues decided to import vast quantities of wheat as a way to address the food crisis and, more radically, to change the staple of their 800 million countrymen: wheat has a higher nutritional value than rice. That year, a 25-year-old French grain trader, Jean-Yves Ollivier, travelled to Hong Kong and crossed the Sham Chun River, the natural border with mainland China, to enter the town of Shenzhen, then hardly more than a fishing village. The far bank was dotted with red flags, portraits of Mao and banners of Chinese ideograms luffing in the wind. In those days the passage over the river was the only way for a Westerner to enter the Communist Middle Kingdom other than by plane.

In Shenzhen, Ollivier found only one set of traffic lights, with the signals ideologically reversed: green for stop and red – the colour of progress – for go. He made good money there and went on to earn a fortune in Africa, a success story he recounts in his 2014 memoir, *Ni vu ni connu* – a mischievous way of saying ‘I got away with it.’ Ten years after his visit, Shenzhen was proclaimed China's first Special Economic Zone, an experimental enclave for dirigiste capitalism. Today, it's a megacity of 12 million people with an ultramodern skyline. It offers a clue to the present-day Chinese adventure in Africa, not so much a ‘new empire’ as a Special Economic Zone of continental proportions for a more ambitious dirigiste experiment in global expansion.

In the 1980s, Shenzhen became a testing ground for Deng Xiaoping's new policy – ‘reform and open up’ – and once the success of the model was clear, it was replicated elsewhere. But towards the end of the decade, the Chinese leadership began to realise that an archipelago of capitalist islands in China would never be able to generate enough wealth and employment to lift the Chinese – already 1.1 billion – out of poverty. As state capitalism became the *modus operandi* throughout the mainland, the party cast around for an overseas ‘enclave’ that could measure up to the challenges they faced. What they needed was an abundant source of raw materials for China's industrialisation, a sizeable market for mass-produced goods (neither too competitive nor too sophisticated), a large host space for outward migration from China and a great deal of land to put under the plough: with one fifth of the world's population, China has less than 10 per cent of the planet's arable land, and a looming food security problem.

Africa was the obvious target: a continent of one billion mostly young inhabitants – two billion by 2050 – and 60 per cent of the earth's uncultivated land, plus one third of its mineral riches. The aftermath of the Cold War allowed Beijing to come in with a low bid for Africa. In the early 1990s, after the demise of the Soviet Union and the end of bipolar politics, the West withdrew from the continent. Washington, London and even Paris, once a thriving postcolonial metropolis, turned to more lucrative opportunities in the Persian Gulf and Eastern Europe. They scarcely noticed when, in 1996, Beijing issued a new watchword: *zou chuqu*, ‘go out!’ Abroad, nobody seems to have grasped at the time that Africa was the destination. In China, however, provincial party leaders immediately

understood that success in Africa had become the sine qua non for a promising career at the highest echelons in Beijing. In a country where 'the emperor is far away,' ambitious cadres from the regions were more than happy to scramble for Africa and the prospect of promotion.

South of the Sahara the starting signal was a state visit in 1996 to six African countries by the Chinese paramount leader, Jiang Zemin, who proposed the creation of the Forum on China-Africa Co-operation. Five FOCAC summit meetings have since been held, and Beijing has pledged \$10 billion in low-cost loans for the China-Africa Development Fund. In parallel, with the amortised equipment that had worked wonders at home (beginning with Shenzhen), China has been busy building infrastructure all over Africa – roads, hospitals, stadiums, convention centres – on a scale and at a bargain-basement cost that no Western donors and contractors could have matched. Lengthy bureaucratic procedures were circumvented and rapid builds went ahead without 'feasibility studies', possibly to the detriment of the environment but also at the expense of the well-heeled international consultants who sometimes hijack and hamper development projects.

Landlocked Chad got an oil refinery which the World Bank had judged 'unprofitable'; post-conflict Mozambique got a \$60 million football stadium; Congo-Brazzaville, the former French colony and the smaller of the two Congos (the Democratic Republic of Congo is the former Belgian colony), got a new national highway between Brazzaville and Pointe Noire in record time, 'after ten years of waiting for our Western partners to get off the ground', as President Sassou N'Guesso still complains. In Mali, the scheme of irrigating 1.2 million hectares – a target set long ago by the French coloniser – no longer seems a mirage; in 2011, Ghana obtained \$3 billion, the first tranche of a \$13 billion loan package that itself surpassed the World Bank's International Finance Corporation disbursements that year to all of sub-Saharan Africa (\$2.2 billion). China's ability to underbid competitors was sometimes accompanied by overpricing and kickbacks: in Namibia, for instance, airport scanners were billed at \$55 million instead of the \$40 million they should have cost by a Chinese company, Nuctech, whose CEO happened to be the son of the then Chinese president, Hu Jintao.

China's state banks offered massive concessional loans and, when necessary, Beijing made long-term barter agreements trading public works for raw materials, chiefly oil (today, Africa meets one third of China's petroleum needs). Since 2000, regular China-Africa summit meetings, interspersed with high-level bilateral visits, have aided the Sino-African relationship at the political level. In parallel, a network of about 35 Confucius Institutes – unlike the British Council, the Institut Français or the Goethe Institut, they operate within established universities and secondary schools, raising concerns about academic freedom – has enhanced China's soft power in Africa. Since the continent's independence, France is the only Western power to have pursued a comparable policy in Africa during its postcolonial *trente glorieuses*, from 1960 until the early 1990s. But France is no longer a serious suitor for a continent whose population has soared from fewer than 300 million in 1960 to almost 1.2 billion today.

Since the mid-1990s, *la Françafrique* has fallen apart while for *la Chinafrique* – the term coined by Serge Michel and Michel Beuret in a book translated in 2009 as *China Safari* – things have fallen nicely into place. A quarter-century ago, China was Africa's 83rd largest trading partner; today, it is number one. Over the same period, a million, perhaps even two million Chinese have established themselves south of the Sahara. Yet Africa's insertion into the world economy has not changed fundamentally: *Chinafrique* replicates the elite connivance, the unequal exchange and the corruption of Franco-African commensalism, only on a much larger scale; at the same time, it is an arrangement with no colonial echoes and no 'civilising mission'.

Howard French has witnessed 'the higgledy-piggledy cobbling together of a new Chinese realm of interest' in Africa and describes the result as 'a haphazard empire'. A former *New York Times*

correspondent with two stints in Africa and one in Beijing, fluent in French and Mandarin, he has followed the emergence of 'China's second continent' at close quarters. Starting in 2002, he noticed the increasing frequency of visits by African heads of state to Beijing – their motorcades drove past his office. In 2006, he went back to Africa, where he had started his career as a journalist in the 1980s, to write a series on China's prodigious rise on the continent, taking Ethiopia, Chad and Malawi as examples; his reports appeared as Sino-African trade lifted off – in 2005 China overtook the UK as a trading partner with Africa, in 2006 it overtook France and in 2009 the US.

French, who left the *Times* in 2008 to teach journalism at Columbia University, is fascinated by the human geography, not simply the geopolitics, of the Chinese presence in Africa. Each chapter of his book offers sharp-eyed reportage of his encounters with the new pioneers in each of the 15 countries he visited south of the Sahara. Some Chinese came to Africa as employees of a state company, and then stayed behind, but most made the move on their own. Impoverished masses in their own country, they discerned a faraway frontier and the prospect of a rapid rise to the top, taking their chances, often with next to no seed money, minimal knowledge of their future host countries and, in particular, no command of the languages spoken there. Despite this, they set up shop, opened restaurants and hotels, or bought land and managed farms.

Not much research has been conducted on the new Chinese in Africa. Even the estimate of their overall number is of totemic rather than statistical value. The push and pull factors for these migrants, their educational background, their selection criteria for African countries, their compliance with visa and residence requirements and their career paths remain hazy. But a few landmarks stick out: incentives by the Chinese government are almost unheard of at the individual level or for small enterprises; the state has not produced an official narrative about its citizens' forays into Africa; air fares between China and Africa are not subsidised; mostly family-based chain migration prevails, with certain provinces – Guangdong (the former Canton), Hunan, Sichuan, Fujian, roughly in that order – providing the trailblazers. A study by the US-based Migration Policy Institute distinguishes two categories of mainland Chinese in post-apartheid South Africa: a group of 'individuals with professional qualifications, business or political connections, overseas experience and perhaps even some capital' who arrived before the turn of the century; and, since then, a wave of generally less qualified migrants, many from Fujian or 'other regions of China not typically described as sending regions'. With an increasing number of Chinese entering South Africa, or staying on illegally, the total may now be more than 500,000.

French's anecdotal evidence adds precious insights. After working as a translator for a state-owned Chinese company in Madagascar, Zhang Yun, a member of the lower middle class back home, stayed on selling goods on a margin as a middleman for other Chinese businesspeople. He accumulated the start-up capital for an electronics shop, which eventually became 'one of the biggest sellers of TVs, computers, mobile phones and the like' on the island. Already affluent, Zhang then studied for an MBA at a French business school. A chance encounter with a Senegalese, who talked up the business opportunities in his country, prompted him to open a restaurant in Dakar in 2007, followed by 'a business importing cheap goods from China, and then a retail shop'. By the time French met him, four years later, Zhang also owned a metallurgy plant and a construction company working on one of former President Wade's pharaonic projects, a 32-storey tower on Dakar's seafront (a contract worth €200 million).

'It seemed clear that lots of money was spread around,' French observes, 'though Zhang wouldn't confirm it.' He preferred to talk about 'trust' and mutual aid among expatriate Chinese – which he believed were in short supply among Africans. Fellow Chinese in Madagascar had helped him in his ascent from petty trade to big wealth and he in turn had favoured other Chinese, while 'partnerships with locals rarely went beyond influence trafficking by well-connected local elites'. Many people like Zhang were making their way from poky shops to executive offices because they had learned at

home to work hard, to close ranks and to suffer – *chi ku*, ‘to eat bitter’, as they say time and again.

The expression dates back to the Cultural Revolution, when schools were closed and millions of young people were ‘sent down’ – up-country – to work alongside peasants and swallow their pride. Hao Shengli, now in his late fifties, was one of them. French travelled in his company to a remote part of south-central Mozambique where Hao has bought five thousand acres from the Mozambican government for a pittance. The fertile land had been part of an abandoned, colonial-era Portuguese plantation. Hao hopes to grow stevia, a tropical shrub whose leaves contain a natural sweetener – 150 times more potent than sugar – that has been widely used in Japan for some time and was approved by the EU in 2011 (usage is still restricted in the US). But local villagers accuse the government of having sold their communal land, and want it back. Hao has contrived a way to parry the threat: he will take his sons and daughters out of school in China, bring them over and marry them to Mozambicans. ‘Do you get it? This means that because the children will be Mozambicans they can’t treat us as foreigners. If need be we can even put the property in their name, protectively, but it will remain ours.’ In the old days, the Portuguese, no less wily, called this ‘libidinous colonisation’.

Along the way, French debunks a range of stereotypes, making short shrift of the notion of the ‘ugly Chinese’ who never leaves his fenced-in compound and takes no interest in his new surroundings – that’s if he isn’t an outright racist. Instead we meet a variety of migrants, some of them married to Africans, some deeply prejudiced but no better or worse than other ‘comprador communities’ in Africa, such as the Indians or the Lebanese. Some of French’s interlocutors praise Africa as a place of liberty, or an unpolluted open space, by comparison to home. But few of them see it as a promised land or intend to stay indefinitely; most plan to return to China or move on to Europe or America. For the moment Africa simply offers them the best competitive advantage. ‘Do you know why Chinese are out here doing this kind of work?’ Gao Yi, an employee in a sugar refinery project in Mali, asks French. ‘It’s because we have no choice. Of course we would like to live like Westerners. Of course we would like to take vacations and go home frequently, but we can’t. The Americans are smart. They take jobs that win them big profits. But we are a poor society and we’re struggling to rise higher. We’re stuck with work that doesn’t make much money.’

French reports anti-Chinese sentiments among Africans but doesn’t dwell on them. In one instance, the Collum coalmine in Zambia, he has failed to update his material, mentioning only a shooting incident in October 2010, when 13 local workers were wounded, two of them seriously, but not the clash in August 2012, when 1200 Zambians – not all of them miners – stormed the premises, killing one Chinese supervisor and injuring two others. However, the picture French paints is broadly in line with what surveys tell us. In 2010, a study in twenty African countries found that ‘favourable views outnumber critical judgments by two to one, or more, in nearly every country surveyed.’ In 2013, a Pew survey corroborated this largely positive assessment for Kenya (78 per cent), Senegal (77 per cent) and Nigeria (76 per cent). Only a poll conducted in February 2014 by the Ethics Institute of South Africa struck a more critical note, with 43 per cent negative versus 35 per cent positive opinions. But the South African NGO’s sample – 1056 Africans in the 15 countries where China’s presence is most important – may not be representative for the continent.

Still, Zambia could be a bellwether. Since the first tax-free zone for Chinese investments in Africa was set up there in 2008, state and private companies have poured anywhere between \$2.5 and \$3 billion into the country – not only into the Copper Belt but, as French notes, into ‘almost every lucrative sector of the economy, including lowly poultry traders who compete cheek to jowl with locals in African-style markets’. This tight imbrication has turned Zambia into a hotbed of anti-Chinese resentment. As the surveys highlight, the more China imports into an African country, and the more it implicates itself in the local economy, the more negative – that’s to say intrusive – its presence is thought to be. Also, the more Africans care about human rights or good governance,

they more critical they are vis-à-vis Beijing. 'Chinese money is too easy, and that facility allows the government to meet its immediate needs and to avoid sound decisions,' argues Aziz Diop, the leader of a group of civil society organisations in Guinea.

Robert Mugabe has used Africa's Chinese moment as a pretext for postcolonial nose-thumbing. 'We have turned east,' he said in 2005, 'where the sun rises, and given our back to the west, where the sun sets.' Outside the structures of government, Africans tend to assess China's presence with more realism than enthusiasm – pretty much the same attitude that Chinese migrants adopt towards Africa. Overall, Africans welcome China as an alternative to the West but complain how narrow the difference is between the two and how minimal the ability of their governments to play one giant off against the other. 'We lack capacity,' Joseph Rahall, the head of an environmental NGO in Sierra Leone, complained to French. 'The government is so weak in policy formulation. It is so weak in negotiating. It is so weak in monitoring things. It is just as weak in implementation. It is basically weak at everything.'

'Africa,' French writes, 'is embarking upon an era of sharp divergences in which China will play a huge role in specific national outcomes.' He predicts forty more years of unabated demographic growth for the continent against a background of resource exhaustion. In his view, 'those who have diversified their economies and invested in their citizens, particularly in education and health, will have a shot at prosperity.' Countries that haven't 'stand to become hellish places, barely viable, if viable at all'. Prudently, French doesn't list candidates for either scenario. He knows all too well that, in the past, the most promising countries in Africa have often turned out badly, while others with modest prospects have managed well. Only the former Belgian Congo has held a steady, more or less disastrous course since the country's independence.

In the rapidly growing library on China and Africa, *China's Second Continent* deserves pride of place, even if there are points to disagree with. Why would one or two million Chinese in Africa amount to a continental takeover, as French implies, while 2.2 million Chinese born in China but living in the US – among nearly four million Chinese-Americans – do not? Africa is not yet the continent of opportunity French describes, with, he claims, a middle class of 300 million – a hugely inflated figure provided by the African Development Bank and ten times higher than the OECD estimate. China is certainly not building a 'new empire' in Africa; it is simply catching up, as Brazil or Turkey is doing, on a continent where it was once under-represented. Beijing still feels there is much to be done: China may be the single nation with the highest volume of trade in Africa, but as a bloc of nations the EU remains ahead, despite a population less than half the size of China's; Europe and the US combined account for twice China's trade with Africa and will remain in the picture for some time to come.

But French is spot-on with his focus on the 'human factor'. What is perhaps most interesting about the new Chinese presence in Africa is the question of identification for Africans. Faced by a white person, Africans can't fail to recall the colonial past and the many lessons in development, human rights, democracy and public health that continue to rain down on them. By contrast, when Africans encounter a Chinese person, regardless of the latter's individual merits or flaws, they are face to face with a role model, a citizen of a country that used to be poor but is now on an equal footing with, perhaps superior to, the Western powers. In other words, they see a bright future for themselves. Yet as long as Chinese migrate en masse to Africa to carry out low-skill tasks in place of Africans, as long as they till the land, as long as Chinese women sell beignets in Kinshasa and Chinese traders peddle religious trinkets for Sufi brethren in Dakar, or sell single cigarettes at street intersections in Dar es Salaam, this future will remain out of reach. If Africa really wants to follow China's lead, it will need its own Shenzhen, and it will have to build it by itself.

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P.S.

* "The Suitors". London Review of Books. Vol. 37 No. 6 · 19 March 2015. pages 15-18:
<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v37/n06/stephen-w-smith/the-suitors>