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CONCLUSION

# China and Africa Rebooted: Globalization(s), Simplification(s), and Cross-cutting Dynamics in “South–South” Relations

Julia C. Strauss

The relationship between China and Africa in the twenty-first century is a subject whose importance for contemporary globalization and development is only matched by the entrenched disagreements on how to approach the subject conceptually. Despite significant differences in disciplinary focus, methods, and analysis, all scholarship on relations between China and Africa converges on the notion that there has been a profound deepening, in both quality and quantity, of a range of China–Africa relations over the past fifteen years. This deepening and “thickening” both augments and reflects a set of processes loosely called “the Rise of China” in a wider arc of neoliberal

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and post-neoliberal globalization, and has a set of profound and varied effects for Africa.

This intensification of engagement has been most visible, and most commented on, in the realms of public diplomacy and bilateral trade and economic relations. Both public diplomacy and trade are regularly promoted through FOCAC (the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation), which has a permanent secretariat, a readily accessible Web site that collects relevant official documents, and most notably has convened high-profile ministerial meetings with African states on a triannual basis since 2000. Not surprisingly, the sudden increase in China–Africa trade and economic relations is a perennial topic of discussion within business and economic policymaking circles worldwide. There is now a much larger range of opportunities and competition in Africa than was the case only a decade ago, largely as a result of China’s involvement on the continent. According to no less an authority than the *People’s Daily* (Cui Peng 2011), China–Africa trade has increased exponentially since 2000, with per annum increases of 28 percent, culminating in China’s becoming Africa’s largest trade partner in 2011. This information, released as a bland official statement, refers to a welter of economic and political engagements over this time period: high profile deals in sectors as different as oil, mining, and agriculture have been concluded between Chinese and African governments. Meanwhile, under the FOCAC umbrella, the Chinese government has announced a large number of initiatives for aid, economic cooperation, education, training, and technology transfer. And finally, even the most casual visitors to Africa are often struck by the Chinese presence, reflected in everything from the logos that announce major tranches of Chinese investment in the basic infrastructure of Africa to the Chinese characters on the signs of small mom-and-pop convenience stores at the crossroads of small settlements in rural parts of the continent.

Although the ways in which China is changing the surface of Africa are visible and concrete (new roads, new shops, new stadiums, new signs), there is little agreement about what these changes signify underneath the shiny new exterior. The official Chinese narrative is the one that dominates even in private circles among Chinese. It robustly, even dogmatically, insists that this transformation of Africa is all to the good. In so doing, this rhetoric of China falls back on a discourse of a half century that doggedly insists on a set of unchanging principles (often obliquely juxtaposed against those of the West): political equality and noninterference; the nonconditionality of aid and investment; long-standing friendship with the other developing nations of the world. In this conception, China is a nation with a long history of shared underdevelopment and friendship in common with Africa; from the revolutionary Maoist period to the present, it has taken the moral high road in always refusing to interfere in the domestic affairs of other sovereign nations. Now that China is well on the route to “becoming a well-off country” and working its way out of underdevelopment, it is in a position to help Africa through extending nonconditional loans on the basis of “win-win” results and mutual benefit. China officially and unceasingly reiterates the

notion that its investment in and interaction with Africa is based on the positive principles of “political equality and mutual trust, economic win-win cooperation, and cultural exchanges” (FOCAC 2009).

Indeed, in this view, China’s loans have made it possible to lay down the core infrastructural investments in roads, harbors, and electrical grids without which Africa cannot prosper. Since the end of the colonial era Western banks and enterprises have been reluctant to maintain, extend, or renew these kinds of projects. China’s small merchants make available to African consumers a range of inexpensive goods that they could not otherwise enjoy. China is clearly willing and able to fill in a set of gaps that Western governments, enterprises, and NGOs either cannot or will not take up. According to this Chinese narrative, trade is growing, economic activity is up, and everyone benefits. In short, China’s engagement with Africa is not only a “Good Thing” under conditions of contemporary globalization, it is a “Good Thing” that reaffirms both China’s continuity with the past (e.g., its claims of China’s inherent morality, the positive elements from the Maoist past such as self-reliance, hard work, noninterference, and developing country solidarity), its contemporary rise, and its bright future as a respected global actor (see Strauss 2009). Given the asymmetries in wealth, power, and development between China and most of Africa, China’s ongoing rhetoric may not hold up to scrutiny, but the rhetoric of few states does. What is striking is how, in comparison to the West or Africa itself, different actors in China, from government officials to managers of Chinese enterprises in Africa, to individual Chinese sojourning in Africa, continue to subscribe to this relatively unified view of China as both doing good and doing so in its own way.

When one turns to the Western reporting, press, and commentary on contemporary China–Africa relations, the tone is so much more critical that it is hard to believe that Western media sources are even referring to the same phenomena. Part of this sharp divergence from the Chinese rhetoric reflects greater openness of the press, and the multiplicity of actors (NGOs, business interests, human rights activists as well as governments with different political parties) with both an interest in and access to public discussion on China and Africa. For example, the international development community is divided on the issue of how to conceptualize China’s engagement with Africa. Some see this burgeoning activity in highly positive terms as a way for Africa to acquire infrastructure and grow, while others counter that the current terms of trade replicate earlier colonial dynamics in which Africa supplied raw materials and the other nations provided manufactured goods (African Development Bank Group 2010). Much of what is available by way of op-ed and commentary in the West on China and Africa gives voice to deep worries about the environmental and human costs of unconstrained natural resource extraction, and the ways in which China’s principles of noninterference and nonconditionality have the potential to prop up weak and extractive regimes captured by small elites. There are also concerns about the lack of transparency in China’s aid and investment regime, and how African natural resources, both oil and mineral, will be

used in China itself (see Mawdsley 2008). At worst, these different strands of Western commentary culminate in inflammatory accusations against China of neocolonialism in Africa.<sup>1</sup> Not surprisingly, the FOCAC Web site carries ostensibly independent editorials from Chinese journalists that hit back against these accusations of neocolonialism: “In reality, such a label [of neocolonialism] is an unfair distortion of China–Africa relations, as actually what the West is doing in Africa is neo-colonialism, while China’s exchanges with Africa constitute a relationship of friendship and win-win outcome in the rapidly changing world” (Shou Wang Mai Tian 2011).

Although there are hints in parts of the international development community and the Chinese development community that their perspectives on China–Africa relations are beginning to converge (Surender 2013), there is thus at present no dominant framework or narrative for conceptualizing engagements between China and Africa in the twenty-first century. Part of this lack of agreement among Euro-American observers is due to the cacophony of voices: how different fundamental premises and perspectives are articulated by different groups (state leaders, aid regimes, NGOs, businesses, travelers, and academics trained in different disciplines in different national systems) in the noisy public spaces of meetings, lectures, and the Internet. Part of the problem is also that the tools for understanding this set of rapidly deepening, quickly moving relationships are at best blunt and only able to capture part of a much larger whole. At their worst, such necessarily partial studies—partial in the sense of incomplete and partial in the sense of bias—reveal more about the predilections and the biases of interested parties and fields (economics, enterprises, NGOs, journalism, different takes on international development, and different wings of academia in the West versus the unified and generalized narrative emanating from official Chinese sources) than they do about the realities of the ever deepening set of relationships between China and Africa.

Whether critical or celebratory, most analyses of China’s involvement with Africa are subject to an entrenched problem of what can be called “incommensurate simplifications.” Each sphere and subfield that engages questions of China and Africa produces simplifications, but in ways that recall Tolstoy’s remarks on unhappy families: each does so in quite different ways. I define these five prevailing spheres of China–Africa analysis as (1) international business/political economy, (2) government policymaking, (3) NGOs, (4) journalism, and (5) China’s official realm. Apart from the latter, these spheres are not monolithic, and each includes a range of actors, views, and points of contestation: the large multinational conglomerate is different from the small family business, the NGO world is subdivided to include organizations at very different scales and with quite different missions, with sharp differences between (for example) the World Bank and Médecins sans Frontières. However, in broad terms each forms an “epistemic community” with a shared set of norms and beliefs about what is important and what works.<sup>2</sup> These five broad spheres engage in their own competitive, yet noncommensurate, types of radical simplification. Each of these

simplifications privileges particular actors and interests, and encompasses particular worldviews about what is reasonable, desirable, and possible. These differences in intent, rhetoric, and shared assumptions matter deeply on their own terms, but as far as analysis of China–Africa is concerned, inevitably each distorts some part of the vibrant complexity of this deepening set of relationships. For example, while there are enormous differences between small family traders and large multinational conglomerates, much of the business analysis and political economy policy literature tends to conflate the intensification of economic growth and trade activity with social (if not political) good; the government policy world tends to simplify in ways that reify the state as a unitary and rational actor; and the NGO world—at least in the West—privileges nonstate associational activity.

Thoughtful and critical journalism acts as a necessary corrective to counter these tendencies toward macro-simplification, but in doing so it engages in its own version of radical simplification through the anecdote, story, interview, or experience that the individual journalist has access to. Indeed the genre within which journalists work is so condensed by the limitations of article word length and the need for intelligibility that the result often plays out as a morality tale that confirms what the editor (and the reader) already perceives to be true. And as far as China’s own official and semiofficial representations of its actions in Africa are concerned, the FOCAC platform that houses China’s official documents on China–Africa as well as reports of approved official journalists provides a relatively unified public narrative and discourse of noninterference, “win-win,” and mutual beneficial links. Although occasionally hints of disagreements within the Chinese policymaking community bubble to the surface—with, for example China’s shift to pressure Sudan during the Darfur crisis of 2004–5—China’s position on Africa also drastically simplifies a complex reality. The easy rhetoric of “win-win” skates over the serious question of *who* wins and under what conditions. Deals made with nontransparent governments captured by small coteries are justified in the name of noninterference in domestic affairs, but in fact they may very well interfere in the domestic affairs of particular states, on the side of those who have captured the state. The sum total of these five different approaches—with their attendant simplifications—does not result in a coherent whole; rather, each of these particular forms of simplification tends to skim over dynamics, processes, and individual agency for those most affected by this deepening set of relationships: namely Africans in Africa who are affected by the Chinese presence, Chinese who travel to Africa in search of investment and employment, and the less numerous examples of Africans who sojourn in China in search of either higher education or business opportunities.

How Africans, both within and outside of government, *themselves* view China is of course a much more important question than either how official China represents itself and its interests, or how many fears (reasonable or unreasonable) that Western journalists, NGO leaders, or businesses may have about China–Africa interactions. Here the evidence that we have at present

is mixed, as “Africans” are no more a unitary category than “Europeans,” “Asians,” or “Americans,” and in many respects are much *less* unitary. Africa has more states than any other continent (54 sovereign states, with South Sudan being the newest), and China has an active and growing presence in almost all of them. The respective degrees of “state-ness” and political stability in these fifty-four states vary enormously, from the well-consolidated in South Africa to the chronically unstable and war-torn Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Somalia. Their geographical scales and levels of natural resource endowments are vastly different, from the enormous (DRC) to the tiny (Mauritius or Gambia), and their populations run the gambit from the 89,188 of the Seychelles to Nigeria’s 170 million. Occupation, class, age, and life chances within Africa also vary enormously: the high-tech entrepreneurs in Lagos have little in common with the subsistence herders in Somalia, but neither do they have much in common with the Ogoni protesters in the Niger Delta of their shared nation. Throughout Africa, and critically for China–Africa relations, there is also huge diversity in degree and strength of civil association. At one extreme South Africa’s vibrant civil society and Zambia’s active trade unions can and do (quite literally) block the actions of Chinese enterprises, while at the other end of the spectrum is the continued capture of the state by such small neopatrimonial cliques as the Obiang family in Equatorial Guinea, where, in the depiction of Mario Esteban (2009), Chinese interests find it quite easy to do business as long as there is continued authoritarian order.

Where we have such data, much of the qualitative and most of the quantitative evidence suggests that while individual Africans are both positive and ambivalent about China’s increasing role on the continent, they are in aggregate much more positive than commentators in the West. The Pew Research Center regularly conducts polls on attitudes toward China, and in Nigeria and Kenya at least, where the Center runs nearly annual surveys, China has consistently high favorability ratings of between 75 and 86 percent (see Pew Research Center 2007, 2010). However, the Pew attitude surveys, while highlighting useful baseline data, reveal little in the way of texture, context, change over time, or the reasons that underlie variation. The survey conducted by Yan Hairong and Barry Sautman (2009) offers excellent preliminary results that suggest variation by country (with Kenyans, Sudanese, and Ethiopians consistently the most positive about China and Zambians and Botswanans consistently the most negative), but this survey was relatively small (with an *n* of 250) and biased toward the highly educated and urban (typically in the capital), as it was conducted in the university sector with either students or professor respondents. Qualitative readings of Internet blogs, journalism within Africa, and interviews suggest that many Africans are working through such basic questions as what is (or is not) new about this set of relationships, and what kinds of opportunities or challenges it offers, or might possibly offer, but these are also often unmoored from comparative context and dynamics over time.

Even a cursory glance at the literature on China and Africa (or the business pages of any major news outlet) reveals ongoing broadening and deepening in such diverse sectors as mining, migration, public diplomacy, investment, agriculture, infrastructural projects, and manufacturing. The question remains how to make sense of these rapidly intensifying sets of relationships in ways that manage to integrate the general and the particular, capture dynamics over time, analyze macro processes of globalization while not losing sight of individual agency, and steer clear of the forms of radical (and often self-serving) simplification so common to (Western) popular journalism, policy analysis, and NGO advocacy. When engaged overtly, questions about what to assess as either positive or negative are subject to serious questions over what—what issues, what scale of analysis, what perspective—to privilege. Is it trade, aid, investment, or something nebulous that includes all of these engagements under a rubric such as “soft power”? Do we concentrate on macro processes or on individuals’ experiences? Do we concentrate on the here and now, or change over time? In counterpoint, the extraordinary quantitative and qualitative deepening of these different kinds of interactions between China and Africa in the last fifteen years has led to a situation in which there is a crying need for thoughtful academic and policy analysis that overcomes, or at least causes us to reflect on, our own biases about normative good in favor of what the most interested parties in this set of interactions—Africans and Chinese alike—make of it, quite possibly with different categories, framings, and simplifications that only partially converge with the assumptions that we, as outside observers, have grown accustomed to. In short, how do individual actors negotiate these new spaces, and how do these lived experiences confirm, adjust, or deepen what it is that we think we know of China and Africa from the different yet overlapping spheres of Chinese official pronouncements, business, government policymaking, NGO work, and journalism?

### **Ethnography: Restoring Agency, Variation, and the Experience of the Individual**

Ethnography is subject to many definitions, and many in social science disciplines such as political science denigrate qualitative methods of many sorts as “mere” ethnography. Fortunately, ethnography is now being rehabilitated in some arenas of social science inquiry, and has even acquired popular followings in, for example, the “Voices of Finance” series on the pages of the *Guardian* by the anthropologist Joris Luyendijk. To take but one very broad definition of what ethnography consists of, the welcome page of the University of California’s Center for Ethnography at Irvine (established in 2006) characterizes ethnography as

perhaps the most important and most widely used qualitative mode of inquiry into social and cultural conditions.... There is no single definition



of ethnography or uniform practice of ethnographic method, nor should there be: ethnographic practice responds and adapts to field research situations. As Marilyn Strathern has written, ethnography, through participant-observation, interviewing, and other qualitative techniques, is a “deliberate attempt to generate more data than the researcher is aware of at the time of collection,” and is thus eminently suited to the study of unpredictable outcomes, complex emerging social formations, and technological and market change.

Irrespective of their original disciplinary training (history, philosophy, sociology, and geography, as well as anthropology), the authors in this special section of the *African Studies Review* all engage with the sorts of qualitative ethnographic methods defined above as participant observation, interviews, and “other,” and in all respects the critical unit of analysis is the individual respondent. Ethnography offers what is in effect a “sixth sphere” to complement the other epistemic worlds that engage with China–Africa. Quite unlike other approaches, ethnography systematically restores the value of individual experience, and takes seriously the notion that how individuals perceive the world, what they understand to be their choices, and how they express their hopes and fears are all things that matter, and matter before they explode into the realm of a journalistic event such as a strike or outbreak of violence. This effort takes as its sine qua non the effort to ground contextually the voices, perceptions, and experiences of those who are not habitually advantaged by the kinds of wealth, influence, or government position that are frequently given outlets in the press or through policy networks, or taken seriously by other governments or powerful business networks. Unapologetic focus on the experience of the individual and what the individual thinks is important foregrounds those who are most directly experiencing the impact of this rapidly evolving set of relationships—Chinese and Africans.

Ethnography, far from being “mere,” actually provides a good deal of warp and weft for our rapidly emerging notions about China and Africa. The articles in this issue deepen considerably many of the kinds of work that Martha Saavedra and I pointed to as the way of the future in our introduction to the 2009 volume *China and Africa: Emerging Patterns in Globalization and Development*, in which we called for more comparison of China’s involvement in Africa in a range of different sectors and in different states, more on-the-ground research, more attention to African voices, more consideration of both individual agency and change over time, and ultimately more collaboration with African scholars.

All of our authors have deep knowledge based on months (if not years) of fieldwork at the grass roots of China–Africa encounters in such different environments as the market stalls of Lomé (Sylvanus) or the underground evangelical African churches in Guangzhou (Haugen). Their field sites range in scale from the tiny to the medium sized to what has been first imagined and then literally built from scratch (Monson). Heidi Haugen (81–102) conducts her fieldwork in enclaves so small and unobtrusive that

they are literally hidden from view in the nondescript buildings of the urban Chinese landscape of Guangzhou. Stephanie Rupp's field site (103–130) includes a wide ambit of urban and rural locations in Ghana. Jamie Monson (45–64) considers a field site that is literally a constructed line through transnational space in the TAZARA railroad, but her subject matter is as much the imagined memory of what the TAZARA railroad now means to individuals widely dispersed across space in Tanzania, Zambia, and China. That memory continues to have relevance to retirees in both China and Africa, as well as those who are currently in positions of decision-making power as they attempt to make the railroad profitable under the constraints of a transnational neoliberal economic regime.

The subjects of these ethnographically based pieces come from all walks of life and they speak in many registers. They include those who on the surface appear to be at the apex of this new set of relationships, others who appear to have the raw end of the deal, and those who have simultaneously benefited from and been on the downside of the China–Africa relationship. It is no accident that some of the most vivid and moving of the ethnographic testimony comes from the temporal bookends of contemporary globalization. At one extreme are the trading “Nanettes” discussed by Nina Sylvanus (65–80); on the other are Jamie Monson's retired TAZARA railroad workers. Temporally, Sylvanus's traders and Monson's retired railway workers are separated by only one generation. But ideologically and normatively they are divided by a revolution in norms or mentalité, in which the current trumpeting of division of labor in a global market and the pursuit of profit profoundly tilts toward a different set of players (the young, the mobile, the capital rich) while in relative terms marginalizing and downgrading the elder, the fixed, and the wage workers.

There is, of course nothing “new” about capitalism's privileging of the young, the mobile, or the capital rich. What *is* new is the way in which the People's Republic of China has lined up in favor of this since the mid-1990s, the way that these principles have become part and parcel of China's “going out” policies toward the developing world, and the ways in which government, private, and quasi-government nexuses directly involved with development initiatives in Africa overlap within China itself. The effects on labor for older Chinese-supported enterprises outside of China (TAZARA and also various showcase state enterprises such as the Urafiki Textile Mill in Tanzania) are as predictable as their effects inside China. Vicious and often pernicious privatization in the name of “efficiency” has led to loss of jobs, loss of security, and loss of pensions for rank-and-file workers as enterprises have closed. At least some evidence suggests that within China most older laid-off workers remained quiet in the hope that some of their promised pensions would be forthcoming from bankrupt state-owned enterprises, and many seem to have internalized the state's own discourse on the ways in which China's “development” and “progress” required the older generation of workers to cede its parochial interests to the greater good (Blecher 2002). In Africa, however, the reactions of older workers and the institutional settings in

which these reactions have played out have been very different. As Jamie Monson demonstrates in case of TAZARA, African workers, far from being resigned to requirements of self-sacrifice in order to allow the next generation to build a strong and competitive nation, remember and valorize their own work experiences as part of a heroic common project, and use that heroism to make concrete claims to labor security and the promised recompense of a reasonable pension in old age. In Tanzania and Zambia, at least, there are organized institutional outlets by which to pursue redress (sympathetic legally trained academics, labor tribunals, and ultimately courts) that can, at least some of the time, force enterprises to abide by their decisions in a way that is unheard of in China, even as in most cases pensions are still unpaid and court cases drag on. In Zambia's copper mines, miners are also able to draw on long traditions of trade union activism and a sympathetic press to take action, including striking to demand (and sometimes even win) concessions in terms of pay and working conditions from Chinese managers. But, as is true for enterprises everywhere, as long as there is a surplus of labor and weak enforcement of labor laws, the balance of power lies firmly within the remit of the investors, employers, and managers who act locally on their behalf.

Perhaps the most interesting feature of all of these articles is the way the individual voices that are captured by the ethnographic method illustrate how much the individuals experiencing China–Africa interactions express both agency and the ambivalence about China's impact on Africa. While Sylvanus's wax-print traders and Monson's retired railway workers have different perceptions of what "winning" and "losing" consists of, their narratives are both replete with considerable ambivalence and individual agency. The retired African railway worker writing letter after letter pleading for the restoration of his pension rights (and for the honoring of the heroic past) is certainly on the receiving end of a power relationship, but the African railway worker still has room to express agency, and he does so in ways that validate (indeed valorize) China, albeit the China of a generation ago that no longer exists outside of sentiment and memory. Similarly, it is clear that many Chinese managers hold considerably more nuanced views about African workers than has been captured by previous work on the subject (see Ching-Kwan Lee 2009; Xiaoyang Tang 2010), and are experimenting with ways to build trust and identify Africans who have the potential to be trained and form part of the core of their enterprises.

Aside from the Basotho, whose unusually negative views of China and Chinese are influenced by a history of little immigration and much current contention with large numbers of Chinese small traders who have displaced local small businesses (Yoon Jung Park, 131–153), almost all of the other subjects of these articles express ambivalence about the Chinese position and individual agency. Students, young and middle-aged professionals, small shopkeepers, and both old and new business elites in the cloth trade in Lomé are both "winners" and "losers," or, in the words of Nina Sylvanus, both "collaborators" and "adapters," and they are often so

at the same time. We see this ambivalence expressed by Ghanaians in the article by Stephanie Rupp; Ghanaian respondents almost uniformly recognized and welcomed China's positive investments in the energy sector, while at the same time remaining deeply suspicious of opaque deals cut between governments that would precommit their country's newfound oil reserves to China in order for the latter to build Ghana's necessary energy infrastructure—whose benefits could well end up in the pockets of small and unaccountable elites.

In some cases individuals express what might be called agency on steroids, as in the example of the entrepreneurial Togolese wax-print cloth trader interviewed by Nina Sylvanus, who identified a gap in the local cloth market for lower-cost wax prints at a quite early stage, went to China, worked with Chinese textile companies to produce cloth of sufficient quality and style to appeal to West African women consumers, and was for a brief period of time able to establish a *de facto* local monopoly on a much prized item, which led to enormous personal enrichment in a short period of time. The fact that within a few years her local monopoly was broken by younger, even flashier female traders who brought in still cheaper Chinese textiles to flood the local market illustrates the other side of exercising agency in such a fast-moving set of interactions as China and Africa; what works dramatically well at one point in time can be rendered obsolete within only two years. Globalized capitalism, particularly in sectors with low barriers to entry such as textiles, can and does create unexpected spaces of opportunity for entrepreneurial individuals, but the early visionaries and entrepreneurs who fill these spaces with local monopolies may well, even typically, find themselves crowded out in short order.

The other side of this pattern of global entrepreneurialism and sojourning is found in China as well, where the entrepreneurial Africans described by Heidi Haugen voluntarily reside in order to make their fortunes at the geographical and cultural the margins of the host society. Many of the African traders in China have overstayed their visas and are technically illegal, most are without the developed business and personal networks that often accompany business success, and indeed many return to their cities in Africa without having made their fortunes. While many African entrepreneurs in China retain belief in their ability to “become the head and not the tail” (in business success), and are promised as much by their underground Pentecostal church, just as many struggle on without anything like the kind of material reward that they had hoped for. Given the profound power and resource asymmetries between individuals and the environments in which they find themselves in most China–Africa encounters, most of the voices chronicled in these pieces reveal an astonishing lack of victimhood. From marginalized African traders in Guangzhou who moved across the globe in search of business success to cloth traders in Lomé to superannuated railroad workers in East Africa, these narratives are replete with individuals who make their respective

ways, both succeeding and failing, often with a perseverance that defies logic and self-doubt.

### **Ambivalence, Perception, and Idiom**

How people perceive and make decisions based on their understandings of their interests and agencies within accelerating frameworks of globalization is at the heart of each of these articles. The ethnographic fieldwork that is the basis of these pieces reveals, as no large *n* survey ever could, not only how interests are differentially perceived and acted on within populations, but also how interests are differentially perceived and acted on by the same individual within a population. Either the perceptions or the interest articulations (or both) may well be logically inconsistent. Particular exercises of agency such as moving to Guangzhou without contacts or linguistic skills in the host language to make one's fortune might well seem foolhardy, but they become much more comprehensible when, as Heidi Haugen demonstrates, they are situated in a cultural context in which religious devotion is explicitly joined to material success. Thus decisions are made and agency is exercised in ways that are filtered through a mixture of "soft" cultural framing and "hard" interests which are often economic in nature, while being expressed in particular idioms.

The Chinese government and the big state-owned enterprises that are one of the major points of contact with Africans seek to project themselves as the benevolent "other." Much of the ethnographic detail in this collection suggests that the Chinese government has, at least in significant part, managed to pull this off. Throughout most of Africa, China and Chinese are now, in the words of Yoon Jung Park, identified as the "other," but not the hostile "other." But at the same time, deep ambivalence toward this "non-hostile other" runs like a thread of high tensile steel throughout most of these accounts. Stephanie Rupp's Ghanaians equate energy with the ability to do anything (cook, work), and are simultaneously welcoming and skeptical of Chinese investment in the energy sector. South Africans are happy to have Chinese trade and investment, but are concerned about Chinese labor practices and human rights violations. Jamie Monson's retired railway workers both glorify China for what revolutionary China did for TAZARA in the past, and are baffled, angry, and saddened by the way in which contemporary China seems to have cast them aside in the present. African workers uniformly express admiration, frequently more than a little tinged with horror, for Chinese work ethics and business practices. Nowhere is this ambivalence more pronounced than in the narratives of Nina Sylvanus's Togolese traders, who simultaneously excoriate China and "the Chinese" for dumping cheap fabrics and other shoddy goods onto the local market and continue to buy exactly those same Chinese goods because they are so varied and inexpensive. But it is not only Africans in Africa who express profound ambivalence toward "the nonhostile other": Heidi Haugen's

underground Pentecostal churches for African traders offer the obverse of ambiguity—indeed they proclaim the certainty of personal worldly riches and salvation in the teeth of a wealth of material evidence to the contrary—but ambivalence and discontent with the Pentecostal pastor is expressed by individuals through absence from church, rumor, and gossip. And despite the pastor’s urging to keep a distance from the Chinese, unsaved “other,” many Africans in this particular congregation were reluctant to do so, for both business and personal reasons. Some African congregants were ambivalent enough about this message of segregation to find Chinese girlfriends willing to come to church with them, until the pastor made it clear that this sort of mixing with young Chinese women was not welcome.

These multiple layers of ambivalence are of course grounded in the ways in which individuals have different interests, and the ways in which competing interests are valued and expressed in different situations. It is perfectly reasonable—and even to be expected—that a wide cross-section of individual Ghanaians will both admire Chinese competence in getting things done while being deeply doubtful as to whether this competence will ever redound to their benefit or result, as so many other initiatives have, in enriching unaccountable domestic elites and their foreign creditors. The South African union protesters demonstrating against cheap Chinese imports while wearing made-in-China T-shirts, and the Togolese and Basotho market-goers complaining about the shoddiness of Chinese consumer goods while continuing to buy them at such a rate that local traders are massively undercut, are by no means unique. One sees exactly the same complaints and tensions in Mexico City over Chinese traders (see Hearn 2012). These kinds of inconsistencies and ambivalences are frequently the local face of global capitalism, whether in the rustbelt of America, the garment district of Mexico City, or the cloth market of Lomé.

What does differ—and it is here that the close ethnographic work presented in this issue makes one of its greatest contributions—are the local idioms in which the opportunities, challenges, and pains of globalization are expressed. Globalization is impersonal, unpredictable, and in terms of ultimate causation, remote. In short, globalization constitutes a field ripe with resentment, fear, and uncertainty, especially when global flows are associated with an obviously foreign face. For every African business that succeeds in carving out a solid market niche, there are many that will fail to do so or fail to keep up; for every successful innovator, there will be many more who will make the attempt but come up short. There are significant and at times unbridgeable differences in both interests and idioms between Chinese and African actors, and these gaps frequently cause misunderstanding and bafflement. The kinds of everyday idioms expressed by Chinese and African actors involve more than just different notions of work discipline and organizational hierarchy. Chinese managers and small traders in Africa carry with them a mental map of what has worked to pull China up out of underdevelopment and poverty: hard work, organization, strong families, and discipline. Even

the most culturally sensitive and benevolent Chinese managers tend to insist that African workers ought to internalize Chinese norms of self-discipline, prudent saving, and moderate habits in their private lives for their own greater good (as well as for the greater good of the company). For their part, whether they are African businessmen needing to find ways of negotiating with the local Chinese state in Guangzhou or resentful tradeswomen who have been out-competed by younger and savvier tradeswomen in Lomé, African actors frequently couch their responses to the distant, the unknowable, the unpredictable, and the putatively unjust outcome in idioms of witchcraft and/or a divine force for good or evil. The relentlessly secular, discipline-minded, and profit-oriented Chinese manager or family trader may well find it difficult to comprehend, much less appreciate, the significance of the open religiosity of African Pentecostalism (Haugen) or the more everyday rumors of witchcraft (Sylvanus) and the frequently deployed, quasi-Manichean idiom of making deals with the Devil that are such an important part of contemporary African society.<sup>3</sup>

### Final Thoughts

The great strength of ethnography lies in the way it takes the individual or small group as a fitting subject of inquiry through interviews and participant observation. The ethnographic method is able to draw out the micro-events, the hidden or overlooked voices that do not make it into the policy briefing, newspaper, or large survey, and place it in a rich cultural and geographic context. Ethnography restores voice to the individual or small group in the absence of a headline-generating crisis or event, and allows the individual narrative to bring out subjective perceptions of agency and normative value. At the same time, all of these articles in different ways firmly place these individual narratives and perceptions in a larger framework of globalization, marketization, and transnational encounter. These articles advance understanding of China–Africa encounters in very substantial ways. They reveal the ways in which globalization with a Chinese face opens up opportunities for growth, consumption, and the physical transformation of Africa, but simultaneously engenders profound ambivalence and discomfort, as new inequalities, erosion of prior work standards, and new sources of entrenching unaccountable African political elites emerge. At the same time, the articles illustrate the kind of rich contextualization that can and ought to be done more frequently, and implicitly point the way to the research of the future on China and Africa, and on China’s engagement with the developing world more generally. With this ethnographic collection as a solid base, it will be possible to accumulate more knowledge and engage in more nuanced comparisons of engagements between “China” and “Africa” in a variety of different ways. Comparison within Africa can

tease out similarities and differences between sectors, by host government, by class, by gender, and by generation. Developing time-series data, by returning in the future to the same subjects and interviewees, can concretize much about transformation in a field everyone agrees is subject to dizzying changes. And contextually informed comparison with similar work on other parts of the developing world with which China is currently engaged can tell us much about Africa's position in a wider context: how the rising economic power of China is processed, experienced, and articulated under different cultural and political circumstances all around the globe.

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## Notes

1. For one example of this, see interview (Nov. 19, 2007, in Kigali) with Astrid Lulling, Member of the European Parliament for Luxembourg, in which she referred to China’s actions as “neocolonialism” ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wbf8VB7I6BU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wbf8VB7I6BU)). For a more sober analysis of China–Africa trade, see African Development Bank Group (2010).
2. The idea of an “epistemic community” was first articulated by Peter Haas, in reference to international organizations, but his definition of “epistemic community” as a shared set of normative and principled beliefs, shared causal beliefs, shared notions of validity, and a common policy enterprise apply equally well to non-international groups. See Haas (1992).
3. For example, see Cruise O’Brien (2003) on the Mouride Brotherhood’s notions of “the Devil and all his works” as a function of the remote Senegalese state.