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Understanding Chinese–African Interactions in Africa

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# Perceptions, Practices and Adaptations: Understanding Chinese–African Interactions in Africa

Karsten GIESE

Over the last few years, Sino–African relations have become a hot topic both in the general media and for scholars worldwide. Large parts of the global mass media are still engaged in painting the big picture of the relationship between China and Africa by conflating the multiple stakeholders and actors on both sides and generalizing about China’s “neocolonialist” strategies vis-à-vis weak African states: its exploitation of African raw materials and populations, its support for non-democratic regimes and its undermining of all Western efforts for reforms across the continent. Where media reports transcend this stereotyping and homogenizing on the macro-level and portray Chinese–African encounters on the ground, it is power differentials, competition, tension and conflict between disempowered African locals and (at least economically) powerful Chinese – the latter as exoticized as alien “others” – that are often the focus of attention.

A growing number of scholars have made efforts to counter such stereotyped media imaginaries by researching Chinese–African encounters and interactions on the ground in various settings and constellations across the African continent – and in China – in order to gain a much more thorough and differentiated understanding of the processes of interaction involving multiple actors with various social backgrounds, beliefs, practices and interests. The collection of articles in this issue of the *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* bears witness to these efforts, as they are based on extensive field research in a variety of African countries, including Angola, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Nigeria, Tanzania and Uganda. Although situated in very different national settings, the articles share a focus on Chinese economic actors who pursue their business activities independently from the development of state-to-state political relations – although state policies affect their strategies, practices and interests. Moreover, the main goal of all authors published in this issue is to explore the daily interac-

tions between Chinese and African actors and to push their analysis beyond common perceptions of competition, tension and conflict.

In their contribution on Ghana and Nigeria, Ben Lampert and Giles Mohan acknowledge that Chinese businesspeople's competition with local importers and their employment of local workers has resulted in racialized stereotyping, tensions and threats against the Chinese as a group. But the authors also caution us that individual narratives of conflict around the Chinese economic presence in these two countries are much more multifaceted and nuanced than that. When analysed in detail, these narratives – around Chinese importers, for instance – often reveal the negative impacts felt by some groups (notably African importers), while showing the benefits reaped by other groups (distributors and customers). Moreover, with regard to employment relations or protective sectorial policies, (African) government officials often appear interested more in developing political and economic relationships with China than they are in the demands of various social groups and civil society actors from their own countries. In their analysis, Lampert and Mohan explore quotidian Chinese–African interactions of conviviality beyond tension and conflict. Without romanticizing such mutually beneficial interpersonal relationships, the authors conclude that the positionality of the local African actor is key for understanding the nature of Chinese–African interaction on the ground: In evaluating which African actors are able to leverage benefits from the Chinese presence and which are not, considering class and the class alliances involved in these relationships is both essential and indispensable. Hence, a closer look into anti-Chinese narratives often reveals the competing African interests behind them, rather than evincing competition between Chinese and Africans in general.

In her contribution, Cheryl Mei-ting Schmitz analyses the ways in which both Chinese and Angolan actors make sense of a new social, political and economic configuration that is characterized by deepening bilateral state-to-state relations and the growing presence of Chinese economic actors in Angola. Schmitz elaborates that while the state-level partnership between China and Angola is viewed positively overall, individual interpersonal relationships remain tenuous. Drawing on extensive ethnographic field work, the author explores how Chinese citizens and Angolans, by participating in this shared context, generate common modes of explanation for these constella-

tions. Schmitz demonstrates that in a situation of pervasive distrust and perceived uncertainty, the shared concern of “security” results in a common language that locates sources of tension in specific ways. Although members of both groups rely on one another for their livelihoods and cooperate in various economic realms (as business partners, employers and employees), the Chinese are routinely portrayed as pirates and the Angolans as thieves. These narratives of security and insecurity are also reflected by the somewhat detached concern of the governments of the two states over the alleged criminal behaviour of some of the Chinese in Angola and the corrupt practices that some Angolan officials engage in, which threaten the positive image and efficacy of the states’ bilateral partnership. Schmitz convincingly argues that it is necessary to combine the analysis of interpersonal encounters and interstate relations in order to clarify how a state-to-state political-economic relationship is experienced and negotiated at the level of everyday sociality.

While Schmitz reports that the Chinese state was perceived by some of her Chinese respondents in Angola as being virtually absent when they most needed its support, the situation of the Chinese in Burkina Faso is distinguished by their complete lack of formal representation as Chinese citizens, as their country of residence does not maintain diplomatic relations with China. Guive Khan Mohammad elaborates on how this lack of official state-to-state relations directly shapes both the composition and experiences of the Chinese living in this African country. Though there are unique obstacles, such as difficulties obtaining visas, Khan Mohammad argues that the absence of official ties has also had the positive effect of making the presence and activities of Chinese citizens in Burkina Faso not subject to any public or political debate at the national level. Based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork, the author concludes that although the presence of independent Chinese migrants forms part of the competition logic of global capitalism, face-to-face cooperation and creative forms of collaboration between the Chinese and Burkinabe have developed. Strategically established by the Chinese entrepreneurs in order to ensure the success of their economic activities, cooperation between Chinese employers and Burkinabe employees, between businesspeople from both groups and between Chinese entrepreneurs and political and administrative representatives of Burkina Faso have flourished. The author thus counters a widespread argument that it is

state-to-state relations and China's Africa strategy that have facilitated individual Chinese entrepreneurialism in Africa. He concludes that in Burkina Faso, the absence of the state has produced beneficial effects for the cooperative efforts of private actors, and that in other African cases bilateral trade statistics (which evince the participation of non-state actors), rather than interstate relations *per se*, should be viewed as indicators of the economic force of "globalization from below".

Attempts made by Chinese businesses to integrate into African economic and social contexts, and the limitations thereof, are explored in a single-case study by Tanny Men. The author intensively studied the localization efforts of a Chinese enterprise in Tanzania and argues that due to the Chinese policy of "going out", combined with both rising costs and local competition within China, Africa will see a growing number of Chinese firms relocating to the continent. Tanzanian citizens, argues Men, are generally positive in their evaluation of Chinese investments in the country, expecting new strategies to mobilize unskilled workers, increase the number of jobs for skilled labourers and positively induce competition. Focusing on market penetration and localization strategies as well as the behavioural patterns of Chinese managers, Men identifies a number of challenges for successful implementation in Africa and beyond. Aside from a general push to imitate Westernized organizational structures and management practices – which the author believes are inherent to the economic development of China in general, and to the "going-out" in particular – it is the cultural, behavioural and social norms of Chinese management that pose obstacles to the processes of integration and localization. The main challenges lie in cultural differences between Chinese managers and Tanzanian employees in the areas of communication, trust, power distances and goal orientations. Men concludes that Chinese managers' way of thinking is mostly driven by Confucian principles that often run counter to the expectations and values of their Tanzanian employees. The author argues that though Chinese managers of the firm under observation have struggled to adapt and localize their practices and principles, labour-upgrading within this cross-cultural context is more likely to occur when employees (despite constantly pushing for Chinese adaptation to local needs) strive to adapt to the Chinese work ethic and goals.

While Tanny Men's article comes from the perspective of the Chinese management as its members strive to localize and integrate

into African markets and societies, the last contribution in this topical issue investigates Chinese–African labour relations mainly from an African perspective. In his contribution, which focuses on Chinese traders and their local employees in Uganda, Codrin Arsene cautions us to refrain from viewing Chinese entrepreneurs as a disruptive foreign presence in Africa, an attitude that leads to their being “othered” and exoticized. These Chinese businesspeople should be more accurately regarded as integrated within the larger system of capitalist production, and their interactions with African host societies analysed accordingly. Concentrating on Chinese–African labour relations, the author proposes a principal-agent approach as a vantage point for exploring the multidimensional interdependencies between Chinese and local actors instead of focusing on the differences and particularities of the Chinese alone. Having begun his research asking respondents to compare the practices of Chinese employers with those of local employers, the author quickly realized that despite all discursive “othering”, local employees criticized Chinese and local employers in the same way for their abusive and exploitative practices, even often using the same words in their descriptions. Hence Arsene engaged in the in-depth analysis of *enjawulo*, a specific, locally embedded, cultural, social and economic notion of propriety relating to work and labour, within the context of Chinese–Ugandan labour relations. The author argues that the extent to which Chinese employers develop an understanding and acceptance for this and other local practices determines the nature of the relationship they enjoy with their Ugandan employees. Based on his findings, Codrin Arsene concludes that local employees take their Chinese employers for what they are: markedly different people occupying a strangely familiar role as bosses. Both Chinese and Ugandans in this way find common ground for conviviality – which brings us full circle.

The current issue is the first part of a large body of new scholarship on Chinese–African interactions on the ground across Africa as well as in China that will be presented by the *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* in a series of three topical issues to be published through mid-2015. The *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* has been a venue for the publication of emerging scholarship on Sino-African relations since 2008, when the first topical issue, titled “China in Africa: Who Benefits?”, was published. In addition to a second topical issue, “China’s Evolving Africa Policy: The Limits of Socialization” (4/2011), which

had a strong focus on interstate relations, the *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* has tracked the development of this field by publishing research articles within various topical frameworks, such as Mathews and Yang's account of African actors in South China as stakeholders of "globalization from below" (2/2012), Hackenesch's analysis of China's and the EU's donor strategies vis-à-vis Ethiopia (1/2013) and Alves' comparative study of China's oil-backed loans to Angola and Brazil (1/2013). Since the full content of the *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* has been freely available online since 2009, readers can find these contributions from back issues in the journal's archive at <[www.CurrentChineseAffairs.org](http://www.CurrentChineseAffairs.org)>.

**Dr. Karsten Giese** is senior research fellow at the GIGA Institute of Asian Studies. Since 2005, he has been the editor of the *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*. His research interests include socio-economic change in Greater China, Chinese domestic and international migration, and overseas Chinese studies.

E-mail: <[karsten.giese@giga-hamburg.de](mailto:karsten.giese@giga-hamburg.de)>

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