

One million migrants

Asymmetry as imperialism in China-Africa relationships

Over the last several years, most of the attention to China's booming relationship with the African continent has treated the concerned parties as near abstractions. China, according to this approach, can be read as one "thing," driven by a coherent set of state-laid plans and ambitions in Africa, which is itself also most often represented as one "thing"—an all but unitary and unvariegated continent.

Even when reporting or academic writing rises above this standard, all too often it succumbs to yet another pitfall: treating China's growing involvement on the continent as a harbinger of all sorts of awfulness, exploitation, spoliation, and the promotion of antidemocratic outcomes or, alternatively, and just as reflexively, taking up China's defense at every turn against attacks by what are routinely presented as deeply biased or hopelessly misinformed critics.

My early work on the China-Africa subject, including a 2006 series in the *New York Times* and a lengthy 2010 article in *The Atlantic*, persuaded me that there was a dimension to this story that was being largely left out amid a focus on East-West competition, resource exploitation, and the "Rising China" narrative. The topic that

seized my attention was Chinese migration to sub-Saharan Africa.

Others have, of course, written about this, but they have tended to do so only in a broad brushstrokes kind of way. To take matters further, I spent approximately one year traveling in seventeen sub-Saharan countries in pursuit of extended encounters with Chinese migrants. My purpose was to understand their stories and, ultimately, to attempt an assessment of their present impact on the ground, as well as their future importance in socioeconomic, political, and geopolitical terms.

Early on in my fieldwork I began to lump my characters into three rough, but to me natural-seeming, categories. They were aspiring farmers; they were small- to medium-sized entrepreneurs creating local industries; and they were traders, which could mean anything from wholesale importers and mom and pop shopkeepers to sidewalk vendors of all manner of cheap bric-a-brac.

Along the way, I deduced two major mechanisms to explain their arrival from China. The first group consisted of people (overwhelmingly men) who first arrived in Africa as contract workers, mostly on state construction projects, and subsequently

decided to stay on. Secondly, there is what I have called the pull factor. People who arrive from China in this way do so as a result of encouragement from Chinese people (or from stories of success they hear about Chinese people they may not know) already on the ground in one country or another.

China's second continent: How a million migrants are building a new empire in Africa employs the much-used figure of one million recent Chinese migrants in Africa. My travels suggest to me the number may be significantly higher than this, but the fact is that there are no reliable official statistics covering sub-Saharan Africa, whether Chinese or African. Although a similar statistical fog surrounds questions of motives or methods of arrival, my encounters lead me to believe that the pull factor has become steadily more important and is probably a more important driver of migration today than the contract worker route.

A thesis I develop in my book, admittedly controversial, is that the large-scale movement of peoples like this, which largely escapes the ability of African governments to regulate or control, constitutes a feature of a new and emerging type of imperialist relationship. Imperialism is, to some extent, of course, in the eyes of the beholder. The basic definition I am using is drawn, in part, from the historical literature of East Asia, and notably from Peter Duus's account of Japan's colonization of Korea in the early nineteenth century, *The Abacus and the*

Sword.¹ Duus writes, "Imperialism requires an available victim—a weaker, less organized, or less advanced society or state unable to defend itself against outside intrusion."

In my book, I document how Chinese officials have used the leverage of aid and growing economic ties to ensure that the doors to continued Chinese migration remain open. Needless to say, despite the presence of perhaps one hundred thousand African migrants in China's Guangdong Province (I am familiar with this community, but it does not figure in my book), there is nothing remotely symmetrical about this situation.

Although the Chinese state has played an important role in *vehiculating* the ongoing movement of its people to Africa, I make the argument that these new Chinese communities are not under the control of the Chinese state and can be thought of as an increasingly important wildcard in the relationship between China and the continent. Indeed, I go one step further to say that the behavior on the ground of the Chinese newcomers, the relationships they form, and their business practices—all things that I portray extensively—will do as much, and perhaps in some cases even far more than the more classic mechanisms of state-to-state relations between the powerful and the weak of the world. Here, one alludes to development assistance and big-ticket trade and investment.

¹ P. Duus, *The Abacus and the Sword: The Japanese Penetration of Korea, 1895-1910* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995).