

SETTING UP SHOP: THE FAR-REACHING IMPLICATIONS OF CHINA'S BURGEONING PRESENCE IN AFRICA

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A Review of *China's Second Continent: How a Million Migrants Are Building a New Empire in Africa*

By Howard W. French

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In the past decade, China's investment in Africa increased from about \$77 million to a staggering \$2.9 billion.¹ Also, China-Africa trade has surged to about \$160 billion per year, a twenty-fold increase from what it was ten years ago.² It is not surprising that the first-ever overseas trip of Chinese leader Xi Jinping was to Africa.³ Today, more than a million Chinese migrants call Africa home, most of them laborers who first arrived in Africa to work on large, Chinese-backed construction projects.⁴ Many of these Chinese companies employ far more of their own citizens to work in these laborious jobs than Western companies do. While the financial flow and migration figures from China to Africa are hard to pin down, what is clear is that Chinese people and money have surged into Africa over the past decade. Hunger for Africa's raw materials partially explains China's growing interest in the continent, but are there other intentions? What becomes difficult to understand is whether the Chinese movement into Africa is part of an organic movement sparked by Chinese individuals who merely seek greater wealth, opportunity, and freedom, or if it is instead part of a carefully designed foreign policy directed by Beijing to spread and strengthen "Chinese values" and dominate a resource-rich continent (as Europeans did in the nineteenth century).

In his fascinating book *China's Second Continent*, Howard French takes a worm's-eye view of the Chinese presence in Africa. Exploring the lives of some of the million-plus Chinese immigrants on the African continent, French brings to life what is really animating in this burgeoning twenty-first century relationship: the people. We see the real lives of Chinese who have uprooted to Africa and the growing African backlash against them. French is aptly placed for such a story, having served as the *New York Times* bureau chief in both West Africa and China.⁵ He has a well-tested understanding of both African and Chinese life, and his fluency in Chinese lends true authority to interviews captured in his book. French invites the reader along as he follows various unpredictable journeys during a year-long excursion through nine countries across Africa. It makes for an exciting and evenhanded account, which effectively illustrates his points while allowing


the readers to deduce their own conclusions. But, he pauses from time to time to nudge the reader's thinking with facts and information. French develops a narrative by speaking with Chinese migrants and African natives about how they view one another. Again and again, the Chinese migrants speak of being in Africa for the long term and that the continent offers them more freedom and opportunity than their own country does, which they find overcrowded and hypercompetitive.

French's portraits vary from the normal to the outrageous. In Mozambique, he meets Hao Shengli, a racist and foul-mouthed agricultural entrepreneur who fantasizes about building a personal empire.⁶ Hao arrives in Mozambique with his life's savings and little-to-no knowledge of the African country. After bribing officials and buying 5,000 acres of land for close to nothing, he begins to displace local villagers and hires workers to grow lucrative crops. He pays his workers as little as possible, while funding an impoverished local girl to satisfy his son's sexual desires. This story sounds like it might have come from Africa's colonial past, but it is entirely contemporary. Hao, like many other Chinese farmers, came to Africa to benefit from its empty expanses: "Africa may have about 60 percent of the world's uncultivated arable land."⁷

In Dakar, Senegal, French talks to a young businesswoman named Chen Rui, who first arrived in West Africa to work in a karaoke bar, but eventually bought the establishment and now serves as its principal owner.⁸ Like many other Chinese migrants in Africa, she believes in the philosophy of *chi ku*, a Cultural Revolution-era expression meaning to "eat bitter," or endure tough times. All across the continent, Chinese entrepreneurs are creating homes and putting together income-generating projects. Undaunted by loneliness, sweltering heat, unknown languages, problems with infrastructure, and other discomforts, Chinese migrants set up shop in the hopes of striking it rich. The challenges of migrating to Africa, they say, are better than the corrupt government oversight, tense competition, and crowded markets back home in China. Each emigrant's story is unique, but there is a common theme: Frustrated with too much competition, a Chinese worker in China hears from friends or family that Africa is a place of opportunity and untapped natural resources—an easy place to make money. The migrant then invests in a small business or enterprise in Africa, which thrives, and informs friends back home of his or her achievement, perpetuating countrymen to follow his or her example. Such movements are often facilitated and tacitly supported by Chinese companies and the Chinese government through generous financing of large-scale development projects.

African natives' perspectives tell a different story. Most African workers on Chinese projects complain about terrible pay, dangerous working conditions, abuse, and discrimination. Chinese companies typically organize unfair deals with

African governments, where the Chinese agree to provide eye-catching infrastructure in exchange for natural resources over the next ten to thirty years.⁹ Beijing boasts of having constructed dozens of stadiums, roads, housing projects, and hospitals throughout Africa—what Chinese diplomats tout as a “win-win” scenario in which both sides benefit. However, by importing massive amounts of Chinese workers to support local development projects, the companies fail to enrich or train locals, who are then forced to take up the most dangerous and laborious tasks. When Western companies or governments attach preconditions to such development or investment projects, like human rights or transparency, African leaders now pivot to Beijing. From Senegal to Namibia, corrupt government officials typically profit from various contracts, while locals are often displaced, exploited, and left with destroyed environments. While many of the Africans whom French interviews are open to Chinese development, they want it to be a mutually beneficial partnership in which African workers are enriched with skills and training and a greater amount of profits are reinvested back into local communities.

French concludes that China’s approach to Africa falls within a broader tradition of imperialism, or at least something similar to it. He sees Chinese presence in the region as a form of extending Beijing’s global power and control, and he predicts that Beijing’s political interests in Africa will expand. In the end, he makes the observation that the West has long underestimated Africa’s economic promise, which has enabled China to create both an economic and human presence on the continent.¹⁰ The West has constantly perceived Africa as a place of conflict and disease, whereas China understands it to be a place of opportunity, growth, and possibility. As French clearly recognizes, this growing Chinese-African partnership remains one of the most important yet underappreciated global relationships of our time. For future foreign policymakers and development practitioners, *China’s Second Continent* offers important insights into the unknowns of modern China-Africa relations and the ramifications that will result from it. 

NOTES

¹ Michael Deibert, “Imperialism 2.0?,” review of Howard French’s *China’s Second Continent: How a Million Migrants Are Building a New Empire in Africa*, *African Arguments* (blog), 9 July 2014, <http://africanarguments.org/2014/07/09/imperialism-2-0-review-of-howard-frenchs-chinas-second-continent-how-a-million-migrants-are-building-a-new-empire-in-africa-by-michael-deibert/>.

² “China in Africa: One among many,” *Economist*, 17 January 2015, <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21639554-china-has-become-big-africa-now-backlash-one-among-many>; Hannah Edinger and Ron Sandrey, “Is China bad for Africa’s Industrialisation?,” *International Centre for Trade and Sustainable Development*, 9 September 2013, <http://www.ictsd.org/bridges-news/bridges-africa/news/is-china-bad-for-africa%E2%80%99s-industrialisation>.

³ Howard W. French, *China’s Second Continent: How a Million Migrants Are Building a New Empire in Africa* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵ Columbia Journalism School, “Howard French Biography,” 22 January 2015, <http://www.journalism.columbia.edu/profile/37-howard-french/10>.

⁶ Alexis Okeowo, “The Settlers,” review of Howard French’s *China’s Second Continent: How a Million Migrants Are Building a New Empire in Africa*, *New York Times*, 10 July 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/13/books/review/chinas-second-continent-by-howard-w-french.html?_r=0.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ French, 46.

⁹ French, 4.

¹⁰ “Africa: China’s Second Continent” (lecture, Speaker Events, International Peace Institute, 9 October 2014), <http://www.ipinst.org/events/speakers/details/580-africa-chinas-second-continent.html>.