

Introduction

China-Africa Relations: Theoretical and Practical Perspectives on African “Migrants” in China

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Introduction

This is a special issue of the *African Studies Quarterly*, and the second issue of this publication devoted entirely to China-Africa relations. The first issue examined China and Africa’s political and economic relationships and media strategies. Ten invited scholars examined the major issues in this relationship, at multiple levels, from medium and small businesses to petty traders. The themes examined included the role of African agency in China-Africa discourse; micro-practices embedded in China’s foreign policy towards Africa; the capacity and challenges faced by African states in their efforts to moderate that relationship; and how African states have shaped this engagement. The issue (Vol. 16, Issue 3-4, December 2016) was titled: “China-Africa Relations: Political and Economic Engagement and Media Strategies.”¹

As Chinese investments continue to grow in all sectors in many African countries they bring with them increased numbers of Chinese citizens on the continent. The number of Chinese people in Africa was estimated at one million by 2014.² The Annual Report on Overseas Chinese found that the number of Chinese immigrants in Africa had risen sevenfold over the last two decades and was estimated at 1.1 million in 2012.³ At the 2015 Forum on China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) held in Johannesburg, China promised to triple its investment in Africa from twenty billion dollars in 2012 to sixty billion in 2015.⁴

This increased investment has led to a higher Chinese presence in Africa and also fueled travel by more Africans to China. The contributors to this issue focus on the African presence in China from both pragmatic and theoretical perspectives. The writers are a diverse group, selected based on their disciplinary specialization and national background. They include a Ghanaian scholar, Adams Bodomu, who has conducted extensive research on Africans in China; a Norwegian scholar, Heidi Østbø Haugen, who has studied the history of African traders in China; and two Chinese scholars, Li Anshan and Dong Niu, who have studied the history of Africans in China and theorized about the future of their presence in that country. Together, the set of articles broadly examine the situation of Africans in China, from students to African traders and brokers in the commercial hub of Guangzhou in south China. Each of the authors has conducted extensive research on Africans in China, and they contribute the unique theoretical perspectives of their disciplines.

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<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v17/v17i4a1.pdf>

Their articles address the following questions: What is the driving factor behind the flow of Africans to China? What have been the complexities of their experiences there? How are they dealing with the challenges of living and working there? What is the appropriate classification of the Africans in China?

Africans as Students

Li Anshan provides a thorough history of African students who form the second largest African diaspora community in China. He argues that while there may be some debate as to whether the students may be classified as immigrants, their existence and interaction with Chinese people has expanded China-Africa relations and the Chinese people's understanding of Africa. While much scholarship has focused on African traders in China, very little scholarship has been conducted on African students there.

Li Anshan is one of the first to provide a historical overview, from the 1960s to the present, including the political context, how African students have been perceived, and their impact on the Chinese political and cultural landscape. Li's study shows how African students have impacted cooperation between Africa and China and contributed to the cultural exchange and internationalization of China's universities. The article articulates the social issues that African students have endured, including racial attitudes and prejudice, and discusses their social adaptation and the evolution of China's international policies towards Africa and Africans.

Africans as Brokers and Traders

Heidi Østbø Haugen provides a historic account of African traders from the pioneering entrepreneurs to contemporary brokers, examining the role of brokerage in the emerging trade connections between China and Africa. That role has evolved since African traders first ventured to Mainland China to purchase goods and thus been a driver for change. Her article "From Pioneers to Professionals: African Brokers in a Maturing Chinese Market Place" notes the major impact of the African brokers living in Guangzhou including the expansion of exports from mainland China to all parts of the African continent.

The author also notes the challenges Africans have faced, which have led to changes in their way of conducting business in order to remain profitable. While Africans have been able to conduct business in China with varying levels of success, they also live with a degree of uncertainty and insecurity due to their tenuous residence status. Haugen relies on personal observation and interaction with some of the African brokers, uncovering their creativity and adaptability.

Haugen's article is related to that of Adams Bodomo, who conducted research on African traders in six cities in China. His article "The Bridge is not Burning Down: Transformation and Resilience within China's African Diaspora Communities," which focuses mainly on Guangzhou, provides an in-depth investigation of the fragile relationship between African and Chinese communities that led to media reports that Africans in Guangzhou were disappearing due to widespread police intimidation.

Contrary to the reports, Bodomo offers a theory of transformative resilience to explain that Africans in China are finding creative ways to adapt. Based on extensive surveys of Africans

and Chinese populations in China, he suggests that what is happening is the transformation of the African diaspora communities in reaction to sterner immigration policies and practices enforced by local authorities in Guangzhou and some other cities.

Bodomo conducted research in African communities in six cities including Hong Kong, Macau, Guangzhou, Yiwu, Shanghai, and Beijing noting the various nationalities, languages spoken, education and skill levels. His focus on the emerging African diaspora in China complements Anshan's and Haugen's historical accounts.

Africans as Transients

Dong Niu's theoretical analysis of the concept of Africans in China ably complements the other three articles. His "Transients: A Descriptive Concept for Understanding Africans in Guangzhou" contributes fresh insights into the study of African and other transient communities in China with a thoughtful and engaging analysis of African communities in relation to China's national immigration policies. Dong suggests that the classification of "immigrants" is at odds with the Chinese legal, non-immigrant system and how Africans describe themselves in China. His balanced research includes a theoretical examination of migration studies and suggests instead the concept of "transients" as a more appropriate term not only for Africans living in China, but also for other communities with no desire to integrate into the host country and with no possibility of being integrated into the host country, where their life is unstable and their future uncertain. He conducted extensive work on African communities in relation to Chinese legal policies. His theoretical findings build on Haugen, Bodomo, Castillo, and others who have pointed to the transient nature of African communities in China.⁵

Conclusion

This special issue of the *African Studies Quarterly* contributes to our understanding of China-Africa relations from practical and theoretical perspectives as well as to providing historical perspectives and examining the contemporary issues facing Africans in China. Written by scholars from Africa, Europe, and China the articles portray the challenges and resilience of Africans in China. The scholars contribute to the theoretical understanding of "migration" and "diaspora" studies. Beyond the analyses of African lives in China, these articles provide fresh insights regarding the African presence in China and, more broadly, the China-Africa relationship.

The four authors discuss the China-Africa relationship in four distinct areas: (1) the history of African students in China; (2) the history African brokers and traders in China; (3) the contemporary status of Africans; and (4) a theoretical analysis of their classification as "transient" populations. The authors offer valuable insights into what may be required for China to reciprocate to Africa's open-armed Chinese embrace, and an opportunity for African states to negotiate better conditions for their citizens who interact with the Chinese, both at home and abroad.

Notes

1 <https://asq.africa.ufl.edu/previous-issues/volume-16/issue-3-4/>.

2 French, 2014

3 Zhou, *China Daily*, 2017

4 For more on FOCAC 2015, see <http://www.focac.org/eng/>.

5 Bodomo 2012; Haugen 2012; Castillo 2014.

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