

# The African Community in China in the Age of Renewed China-Africa Cooperation

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## Introduction

China's contact with Africa dates back many centuries. Contact was first established in the 1400s, when a Chinese imperial fleet of trading ships, warships, and support vessels commanded by Admiral Zheng He (1371–1435) crossed the Indian Ocean, reached Madagascar, and then sailed along the African coast, anchoring in different ports of East Africa such as Mogadishu, Brava (Somalia), and Malindi (in Kenya) (Swanson, 1982).

China embarked on seven trade and discovery missions in the Southeast and South Asian waters between 1405 and 1433. The aim of these missions was to create legitimacy for the new emperor, Zhu Di, to collect tribute and gifts for the Imperial Court, and to display the might of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) by having states and kingdoms demonstrate their submission to the new Son of Heaven (Geoff, 2004).<sup>1</sup>

To achieve these goals, impressive maritime forces were needed, so the construction of the fleet began almost as soon as the new emperor assumed power. With fifty to a hundred ships of different sizes and tonnage,<sup>2</sup> the imperial fleet under the command of Admiral Zheng He was a technological wonder by the standards of the time, featuring innovations that did not make their way into European naval architecture until the nineteenth century.

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<sup>1</sup> Zhu Di (1360–1424), known to history as Emperor Yongle, had launched a coup d'état and started a civil war in order to take the power from his nephew. During his reign, Zhu Di realized a number of ambitious projects. He ordered the Grand Canal, which carried grain and other goods from southern China to Beijing in the north, lengthened and widened, and he also ordered the building of the Forbidden City. For a detailed biography of Yongle, see Tsai, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> The number and dimensions of ships of Zhen He's fleet is a matter of dispute. Some of the ships were probably more than 250 feet long and displaced about 3,100 tons, and, according to historical Chinese sources, the largest missions were accompanied by 27,500 persons (Finlay, 1991; Mills, 1970; Mills, 1970).

On his voyages, Zheng He's fleet carried all kinds of goods, including gold, porcelain, tea, silk and Chinese craftwork. These were exchanged in foreign ports or given away as gifts from the Chinese emperor. In return, Zheng He brought home ivory, spices, myrrh, glassware, sampan wood, kingfisher feathers, and aromatics. He also brought zebras, camels, and a giraffe for the imperial garden. (The giraffe was a gift from the Sultan of Malindi, a ruler from Kenya's northern coast.)<sup>3</sup>

Although the Chinese had discovered and established contact with several African ports on the Eastern coast during their exploration of maritime Asia and the Indian Ocean, it is unclear what impact Zheng He's fleet had on medieval Africa. No lasting political or commercial ties were made, and the only traces of the early Chinese presence in Africa are oral stories and legends that linger in Kenya's Lamu archipelago (Tharoor, 2010). Legend has it that a Chinese ship sank somewhere near the islands hundreds of years ago and that Chinese sailors swam ashore, settled down, married local women and gradually merged with the African community. Although archeologists have found several pieces of Chinese ceramics and some Ming period coins, there are no traces of Chinese customs or language among the local population in Kenya.<sup>4</sup>

Beginning with the creation of independent states in Africa in the 1950s, the continent came to occupy an increasingly important place in China's foreign policy and geopolitical doctrine. According to many scholars and practitioners, the cornerstone of today's flourishing China-Africa relationship was laid at the Asia-African Conference held in

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<sup>3</sup> There are many theories on how exactly this giraffe arrived in China. For instance, some scholars believe the giraffe was taken from the ruler of Bengal—who himself had received it as a gift from the Sultan—and that it inspired Zheng He to visit Kenya a few years later (Zyang, 2006; Ringmar, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> As a result of the discovery of these coins, China launched a three-year project with the assistance of the Kenyan government to search for the wreckage of one of Zhen He's ships, which had supposedly foundered off the East African coast.

Bandung, Indonesia, April 18–24, 1955 (Taylor, 2006; Muekalia, 2004; van de Looy, 2006). As most of the participants at the conference shared a history of colonization by Western states and a common desire to overcome the legacies of former regimes by forging closer ties with one another, the conference became a symbol of Afro-Asian solidarity and anti-imperialism. It was also a milestone on the road to multi-dimensional Sino-African cooperation, because Communist China used this opportunity to enhance its solidarity with the Third World as a whole and to deepen diplomatic relations with particular African and Asian nations.<sup>5</sup>

Even though his image as a patriotic national hero has been created and popularized only in the past decade,<sup>6</sup> Zheng He has become a powerful symbol for modern China.<sup>7</sup> His notoriety has risen in parallel with China's emergence in global affairs and geopolitics, especially following an increase in the Chinese presence on the African continent. In official Chinese discourse, Zheng He's maritime expeditions are often cited as an example of the difference between the roles of China and the West in the world.<sup>8</sup> Zhen He's

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<sup>5</sup> As a result of these first tentative links that the People's Republic of China (PRC) made in Bandung, bilateral trade between China and the African continent grew steadily, increasing nearly seven-fold between 1955 and 1965 (Cooley, 1965).

<sup>6</sup> *Time's* correspondent, who visited Zheng He's memorial in Jiangsu province in 2001, describes the site as a deserted place with a dirt path leading to Zheng He's tomb, which is covered with graffiti and surrounded by overgrown weeds. The museum was closed and there were no markings for the site along the road, no signposts or souvenir shops selling Zheng He memorabilia. Now, however, the site attracts thousands of tourists from all over China (Ignatius, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> In 2005, China celebrated with great pomp the 600th anniversary of the first voyage undertaken by Zheng's fleets, dedicating the opening ceremony of the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing to this adventurer.

<sup>8</sup> As Xu Zu-yuan, PRC Vice-Minister of Communications stated in July, 2004, Zhen He's missions "were friendly, diplomatic activities. During the overall course of the seven trips to the Western

peaceful missions in Africa<sup>9</sup> are commonly compared to the coercive and economically aggressive measures Europeans have employed for centuries in their relations with Africa.

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Ocean, Zheng He did not occupy a single piece of land, establish any fortress or seize any wealth from other countries. In the commercial and trade activities, he adopted the practice of giving more than he received, and thus he was welcomed and lauded by the people of the various countries along his routes” (Geoffrey, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> In fact, these missions were not as peaceful as Chinese officials and certain Chinese and non-Chinese scholars pretend. For instance, Zheng He’s fleet included quite a number of important military men, approximately 20 thousand on each occasion. On several occasions related in Chinese historic documents, Zheng He intervened in local conflicts, and in 1411 he invaded the royal city of Sri-Lanka, captured the king, destroyed his military, and carried the king and his family members back to the imperial court (Geoffrey, 2004, 16).



## **African Immigration: A New Perspective on China-Africa Relations**

Alongside China's trading activities, investment and aid to Africa, migration has developed steadily between the two partners. Chinese communities composed mainly of traders, entrepreneurs, and contract workers appeared in major African cities and economic centers in the late 1990s. This migration pattern has drawn international attention to the many aspects of China's presence in Africa. Mass media publications, international development experts, and politicians all over the world have noted China's presence in Africa.

However, the inverse migration process—African migration to China—has been studied by only a few scholars,<sup>10</sup> even though thousands of Africans have come to China, especially since the early 2000s, in hopes of benefiting from the commercial and professional opportunities offered by China's booming economy.

According to estimates based on official Chinese statistics, the current African population in China is between twenty thousand and one hundred thousand (Le Bail, 2009, 60; Bodomo, 2010, 693–707; Bertonecellos and Bredeloup, 2009, 45–70). Most of these migrants reside in three cities of southeast China—Hong Kong, Guangzhou (Guangdong province), and Yiwu (Zhejiang province). Consequently important African communities have emerged in these cities. These communities have established extensive international business and migration networks that connect Chinese commercial ports and production areas with many different cities and regions in Africa, as well as with numerous African communities all over the world.

Who are these African migrants? Why did they decide to come to China? What are the main socio-demographic characteristics of this new migrant population? How is this migration organized? Is it possible to speak about the

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<sup>10</sup> See for example, Bertonecello and Bredeloup, 2007, 98–110; Bodomo, 2009, 4–6; Le Bail 2009, 3–28; Li, Xue, Lyons, and Brown, 2008, 11–15.

emergence of a stable African community in southern China? What are the key factors in the process of community formation and identity-shaping? What problems do Africans face in China, and what does the way they are treated and integrated (or not) tell us about China-Africa relations? In other words, are the relations portrayed by Chinese officials as based on friendship, respect, and mutual benefit a reality for African migrants in China?

This paper is based on data gathered during research missions in Beijing, Hong Kong, and other cities in China. It also draws from online blogs of African migrants in China and materials published recently by Chinese and foreign scholars. The paper attempts to answer the above questions in order to shed some light on the African presence in China.

## **A Brief History of African Presence in China**

Although the African community in China seems to be a quite recent phenomenon, African migrants in fact first appeared in southern China in the second half of the sixteenth century, when pioneer Portuguese navigators arrived and settled in Macao (Morais, 2009, 1–19). Africans were assigned as galleys in the trading ships that sailed from Macao to Portugal's posts in India and Japan; they were also employed in private households or at Jesuit missions in southern China. Some Africans who came to China as slaves served under Chinese forces or became pirates who ravaged Chinese coasts (Show, 1988, 250).

Despite the abolition of slavery in 1878, African migrants from Mozambique, Guinea and Angola continued to arrive in Macao, where they served in the Portuguese colonial army as soldiers guarding the governor's palace (Morais, 2009, 5). The Portuguese government kept these African troops in Macao until 1975, when the Portuguese colonial system started to collapse. The African soldiers left the territory to return to their newly independent home countries.

Today there are still reminders of the African presence in Macao in the topology of the city and in the collective imagination of its residents. For instance, the famous tourist attraction Mong Ha Fortress is also known as the "Black Ghost" Fortress because it was converted into barracks for one of the African Portuguese garrisons stationed in Macao. Folk legends have maintained a trace of the presence of African migrants. One legend, for example, tells the story of a priest and a number of African slaves defending Macao from a Dutch attack in the seventeenth century. In particular, the legend highlights the story of an African woman who fought fiercely and bravely (Morais, 2009, 8). Finally, one of the popular gastronomic curiosities of Macao—African

chicken—is believed to be one of the traces of the African passage in that region.<sup>11</sup>

The first African migrants to come to Communist China arrived as students. After the Bandung Conference in 1955 and with the subsequent Chinese political influence in Africa, China began to receive African students at different Beijing institutions.<sup>12</sup> There were about 120 Africans studying in China in 1961–1962, most of them originating in Somalia (40 percent) and Cameroon (30 percent), with others coming from Zanzibar, Uganda, Ghana, Congo, Kenya, Chad and Sudan. However, almost all of these students returned home within a year or two due to poor educational and living standards,<sup>13</sup> constant political indoctrination, and inadequate social life.

In spite of this, Communist China continued to carry out its educational cooperation and exchange with African states. The Chinese government restored its African scholarships (which had disappeared during the Cultural Revolution) in the late 1970s,<sup>14</sup> offering an extensive academic and scholarship program for African students and training

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<sup>11</sup> The standard recipe for African chicken calls for brushing the chicken with a sauce made of garlic, peppers, white wine and vanilla. After the chicken is baked, the juices are mixed with the sauce and drizzled over the chicken, giving it a zesty, sweet taste.

<sup>12</sup> In the 1960s, the PRC provided financial support, equipment and training to a variety of liberation and anti-colonial movements, such as FRELIMO in Mozambique or UNITA in Angola, that were inspired by Maoist theories and revolutionary literature.

<sup>13</sup> Poor living standards were a product of the disastrous economic and social policy known as the Great Leap Forward. Launched by Mao Zedong in 1958, this policy was intended to develop Chinese industry and modern agriculture through the process of rapid industrialization and mandatory collectivization. The Great Leap Forward ended in catastrophe—one of the greatest famines in Chinese history with millions of people dying of starvation.

<sup>14</sup> During the first years of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), most Chinese universities and technical institutes were closed, educational materials were destroyed, and many members of teaching staff were imprisoned; as a result, China had no means to continue its scholarship program for foreign students.

programs for African professionals. Since then, the flow of African students has been steadily growing. According to Chinese statistics, between 1950 and 2009 over 29 thousand African students, including several political leaders, received Chinese government scholarships to study in China.<sup>15</sup> In the past few years, China has begun to receive self-supporting African students as well.<sup>16</sup>

Most of these students have since gone back to their home countries, but some stayed in China or moved to Hong Kong, where some are now employed by either international or Chinese companies, while others have set up their own, mainly trade-related, businesses. Thus, these former students have become the first generation of an emerging African community in China. With the RPC's economic and political development, these communities have been joined by new migrants who came to explore the potential of Hong Kong and emerging Chinese mega-cities such as Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and Shanghai.

These new African migrants, many of whom were traders, often came from other Asian countries such as Thailand or Indonesia. They had been following the routes of precious stones and the gold trade between Africa and Asia in the mid-1980s and rapidly created well-organized international trading networks in order to export Asian textiles to Africa and to supply local and regional markets with African wood and fruits (Bertoncello and Bredeloup, 2009, 56). Once established in Bangkok or Jakarta, African entrepreneurs continued to explore the economic and logistic opportunities of Southeast Asia and thus arrived in Hong Kong. From there

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<sup>15</sup> China-Africa Economic and Trade Cooperation, *Ministry of Commerce People's Republic of China*, 15 February 2011, available at: <http://english.mofcom.gov.cn/aarticle/subject/minister/lanmua/201102/20110207420901.html>

<sup>16</sup> According to the Chinese Ministry of Education only 1,390 self-funded African students came to study in Chinese universities in 2005, accounting for just 2 percent of the total 141,087 foreign students in China.

they gradually moved closer to the primary production sites—Guangzhou and Yiwu.<sup>17</sup>

Due to low production costs in China, direct imports leading to lower trading margins, and low opportunity costs for the traders themselves, Chinese commodities were more accessible for African customers than many products traded in more conventional chains of supply. This drew even more African migrants to China, generating new businesses and rapidly changing international commodity flows into Africa. African students and pioneer entrepreneurs who had already settled in China assumed the role of intermediaries, providing new migrants with useful information and basic business connections and greatly facilitating their economic activities and interactions with local Chinese producers and administrators. As a result, a more stable community has appeared with a relatively small core of African students, diplomats, and transnational businessmen who have more or less permanent residence in China. The community also has numerous active members who navigate between China, Africa, and other Asian countries, as well as between different Chinese cities and regions. Their number is rapidly increasing due to the continued arrival of new migrants.

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<sup>17</sup> The migration of African entrepreneurs from Southeast Asia to China was also caused by the general deterioration of the economic conditions in this part of the world (i.e., the 1997 Asian financial crisis) and by the growth of nationalist and xenophobic sentiments in Indonesia, which greatly disturbed all economic activities led by foreigners in this country.

## **Emergence of an African Community in China: Reasons and Contexts**

What set this migration in motion? How do potential African migrants make the decision to move? Why do they choose China as a host country? There are a number of factors that influence people's decisions to migrate as well as many migration theories that try to explain and classify these factors.

Migration is generally motivated by a lack of opportunity at home; for example there may be poverty, scarcity of jobs, economic collapse, war and conflict, religious or political persecution, or natural disasters; but migration is also prompted by a surplus of benefits abroad, for example higher living standards, better job opportunities and wages, social security, and stable economic and political environments.<sup>18</sup> Other factors such as individual and family characteristics, risk-coping strategies, and labor and capital market imperfections in the destination and home countries, as well as the presence of settled migrants in the host society, can also influence the decision to migrate (Stark, 2003).

The first wave of migrants, composed of students and entrepreneurs, put in motion and sustained the mechanism of "chain migration" defined by MacDonald and MacDonald (1964) as "that movement in which prospective migrants learn of opportunities, are provided with transportation, and have initial accommodation and employment arranged by means of primary social relationships with previous migrants (MacDonald and MacDonald, 1964, 82–97)." In other

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<sup>18</sup> This migration model, known as "push and pull factors," was first proposed by Ernest Ravenstein (1834–1913), an English geographer. It was reformulated and extended by Everett Lee, who showed that factors such as distance, natural and political boundaries, and having dependents can affect migration decisions. Lee also argued that social factors such as age, gender, and social class, as well as education level, social support/safety nets, and networks determine and influence how individuals, households, and communities react to push and pull factors.

words, African migrants from the first wave, who settled in Hong Kong and then in Guangzhou, have provided their relatives, friends, and associates not only with general information about China and its economic opportunities, but also with important specific details about jobs and business and study prospects. At times, the original settlers have played a prominent role in financing later migrants' moves to China or in finding housing or jobs for their kin and friends, thus establishing networks of information, assistance and obligation (Bertoncello and Bredeloup, 2007, 99).

This expanding network increases the likelihood of migration because the social capital provided by ties of kinship, friendship, and ethnicity connects migrants in China with potential migrants in African countries. These ties reduce the costs and risks of migration. The first Africans in China, who went to explore then-unknown regions and markets, had no personal network to rely upon; hence for them migration meant relatively high financial costs and risks. But for subsequent migrants the cost has generally been lower; they can count on social ties for guidance and information.<sup>19</sup>

Positive feedback about the host country shared by migrants with their families and acquaintances back home has repeatedly been identified as playing a role in subsequent migrations (Massey and Taylor, 2004, 394; Simon, 2008, 255; Guilмото and Sandrone, 2003, 142; Pina-Guerassimoff, 2004, 170–189). By sending money and positive information back home, African migrants are directly and indirectly encouraging other family or community members to migrate. However, the potential migrants often filter out negative information, focusing instead on the success stories of community members or acquaintances.

Although this information is quite often incomplete, it can still have a strong influence on the decision-making process in the pre-migration phase.<sup>20</sup> As one of the interviewed

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<sup>19</sup> As a result, the network becomes an independent factor encouraging further migration (Massey et. al, 1993, 431–466).

<sup>20</sup> The information that motivates people to migrate could be also quite subtly distributed through mass-media publications and



African migrants explained, he chose to come to China because there were already a lot of his fellow countrymen there and because he heard that they were “doing well”:

*I came here because there are so many Nigerians here doing business—good business. There are so many of them who married Chinese women and they are set up with them, perfect idyll, wife and kids. They are doing well and they love this place. I wanted to be like them. So, Guangzhou kind of allows foreigners to settle down and do their business, because it's only here that you can see foreigners transact their business without being disturbed by anybody. There are so many things that make it possible for the business transactions to be good. We have so many ‘brothers’ and agencies that settle in Guangzhou that makes it easier whatever you want to do. You can get whatever you want right now.<sup>21</sup>*

Although a considerable number of migrants travel individually and do not rely on social networks or transnational communities, African migration to China seems to be a collective decision-making process involving families and local communities. In many cases family and community members encourage migration by helping to collect money for the first step of the migration process, providing a network of social and business connections in the host country, or transmitting useful information about new migration routes and opportunities.<sup>22</sup>

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advertisements. One of the best examples of such influence is the publicity campaign launched by Western Union, a company that is profiting from global migration flows. During one such campaign in Dakar, for example, city walls were covered with Western Union posters in which a happy elderly African woman is holding handfuls of cash. Under the image is this inscription: “Another reason to be proud of my son” (Ros et. al, 2007).

<sup>21</sup> Interview conducted in Hong Kong, at wholesale market, 2009.

<sup>22</sup> For example, studies conducted among African migrants in Europe coming from Senegal reveal that it is often the mother who plays a key role in the decision-making process; or the second wife in a polygamous family, having fewer privileges than the first wife, encourages one of her sons to migrate. For other ethnic

Recent research carried out on migrants of different ethnic and social origins considers migration one of the survival strategies that households or even whole communities use in an era of transnational economies and globalized society (Stark, 1991, 406; Barham and Boucher, 1998, 307–331; Taylor and Rozelle, 2003). Households use migration to protect their incomes from too-severe fluctuation and to protect themselves from various forms of market failure. In the event that economic or social problems in the home country reduce household income, remittances from family members abroad, who are less affected by these problems, will help the household survive. Thus, migration can operate as a sort of risk management strategy; it can be a way to ease a household or community's financial challenges in the absence of insurance and credit markets or provide stability during the fluctuations of markets and financial institutions (Konseiga, 2005; Herman, 2006).

For instance, one of the respondents from Nigeria told us he had not made the decision to migrate to China on his own; rather his uncle and other family members discussed the situation and advised him to migrate. As the youngest brother in a family of five male and two female children, he was not the only person to move abroad. One of his brothers had gone to the U.S. and one of his sisters had gone to the U.K. His other siblings stayed at home to help his father manage the family business and estate. His uncle, who was importing textiles from Indonesia, made a stop in Hong Kong on one of his trips to Kuala-Lumpur. Like many other transnational African traders, he realized that prices for products on the Chinese market were lower than those of the exact same products on the Indonesian market, so he decided to extend his business network to Guangzhou.

His uncle's stories about dealings with Chinese factories and about the thrilling new economic opportunities in Guangzhou were vivid and often discussed by the respondent's family members; this is how the idea to send someone

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groups, the uncle or oldest brother can also play a key role (Schapendonk and Van Moppes, 2007, 29).

to China had developed. After some debate, the respondent was designated as the best candidate for migration as he was least implicated in the family business.

This migrant story is a classic example of a family survival strategy. The family has sent three of its children (i.e. labor assets) to geographically and economically distinct regions in order to secure the family's well-being and a stable position within the local community.

Once in China, the respondent joined his uncle's import-export business. His role there was to control the purchase of goods, their transportation to the port, and further shipment to Africa:

Most Africans started to come to China around 2000 because of the lower price, that's all. When you work with Chinese people, you can work with them but there is no... 'confidence'... mutual trust. That's why my father and my uncle wanted me to be there. Cause they can work with transactions and banks and stuff like that. But when the Chinese are downloading their goods, they can put some fake goods there. Like a TV where there is nothing inside. We lost around \$9 thousand because of these fake goods, they load the container, and the container came to Africa.<sup>23</sup>

Circulating between Guangzhou, Yiwu and Shanghai, this gentleman took care of all the necessary administrative procedures, negotiating reasonable prices with suppliers or directly with Chinese factories, and assuring that all the transactions were going smoothly. Though he did not speak Chinese very well, he sometimes acted as an intermediary between Africans who had just come to China and local Chinese producers. He helped them establish useful contacts, select goods, and ship the purchased goods back to Africa. In return, he received some monetary compensation, made new

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<sup>23</sup> Interview conducted in 2011, on the forum of African community in Shanghai, available at: [http://www.afroshanghai.com/forums/..](http://www.afroshanghai.com/forums/)

connections, and found potential clients for his warehousing and container-loading services.

In general, when asked about the reasons they decided to come to China, African migrants give a wide range of answers, most of them practical. They explain that their decision was shaped by China's rise as a global economic and political power and its growing presence in Africa. As one of the respondents, a twenty-eight year old woman from Zimbabwe stated:

The reason I came to China was because China is the next upcoming emerging market and definitely is the place to be. Booming Chinese economy and ever closer ties with Africa create opportunities as tempting as any in the West.<sup>24</sup>

The respondent had come to China several years before, after graduating from an American university. In China she first studied at Beijing University and then found a well-paid job at one of the Chinese international TV channels. For her, China represented an opportunity to make an interesting career, to live a dynamic professional life, and to achieve her ambitions. Zimbabwe seemed to her much less attractive, considering her skills and diploma. Another respondent who came to China from Congo to study business and who stayed after graduation working as a DJ in Beijing and Shanghai night clubs describes the same feeling:

I felt the energy, the opportunity, and I felt the magnitude, how big stuff is here and how big stuff will be in the future. So I decided, okay, I think that's the place I should stay.... I was feeling like, wow, I am in the right place in the right time.<sup>25</sup>

Those who came as traders, with both short- and long-term residence in China, also mention the booming Chinese economy and the many business opportunities in Southern China. The fast development of trading infrastructure and

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<sup>24</sup> Interview conducted in Beijing, 2008.

<sup>25</sup> Interview conducted in Beijing, 2008.

the logistics industry, as well as a number of relatively unoccupied niches in the market, are the major encouraging factors in this migration movement to the PRC, but they are not the only ones. The situation in the migrants' home countries plays a role, as does the global economic and political conjuncture. A combination of events in Africa—the worsening of economic conditions and the socio-political unrest that has engulfed many African societies—as well as the progressive tightening of immigration policies in Europe, are also among the reasons increasing numbers of Africans choose new migration destinations and explore new migration routes (Nwajiuba, 2005; UNDP, 2009; Van Moppes, 2006).

## **Socio-Demographic Profile of Africans in China**

There are very few statistics available on the African community in the PRC. The study of African migrants from the time of their arrival through their integration into Chinese society is crucial, but it is also difficult because of the scarcity and unreliability of data. The subject of African migrants is also politically sensitive and plagued by social tension, which affects the quality of official information available as well as the researcher's ability to collect it.

To our knowledge, there have been only two major statistical surveys conducted among Africans in China so far. The first was done by Adams Bodomo, Professor of Linguistics at the University of Hong Kong. He distributed a hundred questionnaires among African migrants in Guangzhou in 2008; of these, 77 questionnaires were returned. He also interviewed eight community members including some community leaders (Bodomo, 2010). The second survey also took place in Guangzhou, where in 2006–07 a group of researchers led by Li Zhigang and Xue Desheng of Sun Yat-sen University carried out a series of surveys that included questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Through random sampling they gathered 78 questionnaires (43 in English and 35 in French) and interviewed 46 African migrants, mainly businessmen and traders ((Li Zhigang et. al, 2008, 13; Li Zhigang, Laurence, and Xue, 2009). In addition to these two quantitative surveys, there is also some qualitative information provided by French researchers Sylvie Bredeloup, Brigitte Bertoncello, and H el ene Le Bail, who conducted a number of in-depth interviews with African migrants in Hong Kong, Guangzhou, and Yiwu between 2006 and 2008 (Bertoncello and Bredeloup, 2007; Le Bail, 2009). The participants were mostly African traders and entrepreneurs living in the south of China.

Although Africans coming to China have different socio-demographic profiles, we can establish some basic categories of migrants:

- diplomats and other official representatives from various African countries;

- students and trainees studying on a short- or long-term basis in the PRC;
- professionals from the African continent and from the African diaspora living and working in China as employees of multinational companies and international organizations;
- traders and small businessmen on long- or short-term stays in China.

The last category is by far the largest, though the boundaries between categories are not clear-cut. For instance, many African students are working as interpreters, tourist guides, and language teachers; some have started their own businesses or begun small-scale trading in tandem with their studies. The same situation can be observed with African professionals and official representatives, who sometimes have their own small import-export companies or offer certain back-office or logistic services.

The exact number of Africans in China today is unknown. The Chinese and Western press give various estimates, which are always high, ranging from one- to two-hundred thousand (Branigan, 2010; Wang, Shanjuan, and Jie, 2010). The figures published by the press are not always reliable, however, because the methodology of calculation is unknown, and the figures are often estimates made by people with no experience in statistical calculation. Furthermore, these figures are not confirmed by an analysis of the official data, i.e. the statistics of the Chinese state institutions that issue visas and residence permits.

According to the Public Security Bureau of Guangzhou, the city where the majority of African traders and businessmen settle upon their arrival in China, there were approximately 1,080 Africans living in the city in 2005.<sup>26</sup> Nonetheless, many African traders have dubious legal status and do not figure in official statistical records. They come to

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<sup>26</sup> There were 18 thousand long-term residents in Guangzhou in 2005; 55 percent were from Europe and America, 34 percent came from Asia, 6 percent from the Middle East and 6 percent from Africa (Li Zhigang et. al, 2008).

China with all the necessary legal papers—valid passports and Chinese visas—but once the period of the permitted visit has expired, they remain illegally in China. According to estimates made by experts who based their calculations on the data collected from hotels and restaurants in Guangzhou, there were around 32 thousand African migrants in 2005 (Li Zhigang et. al, 2008).

As for African students and trainees, another important group of migrants, their number in 2008 was estimated to be in the 12 to 15 thousand range (LIU, 2009). Most of these African students go to the PRC on Chinese government scholarships. This is an important part of South-South assistance programs and of China's development strategy in Africa. The collaboration has expanded from an initial simple exchange of students to the current multi-level educational cooperation, covering various fields and taking many different forms. Since the 1950s, China has provided more than 30 thousand scholarships for students from almost all African countries (*Xinhua* 2010), with the exception of just three states: Swaziland, Burkina Faso, and Sao Tome and Principe (Sautman and Yan, 2007; Li, 2006).

There are also many African trainees—those who came to participate in educational training programs—in China. For instance, in 1967, Beijing agreed to sponsor the construction of the Tanzania-Zambia Railway (TAZARA), known as the “Freedom Railway,” and to train hundreds of Africans in different rail-building skills (Monson, 2009, 209). This railway, which links Zambia with the port city of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, was China's largest international development project at the time. Between 30 and 50 thousand Chinese railway experts were dispatched for the project (Monson, 2009, 8). They trained hundreds of African workers, who learned new skills and techniques. The work of the Chinese was supported by Africans, who were sent to China to complete their training. This group of experienced African railway specialists continued to work for TAZARA until their retirements.

This does not mean that things always went smoothly. As Philip Snow (1988) noted:



*In the years that the Tan-Zam line was being built, the Chinese ran technical and managerial courses for 1,200 Tanzanians and Zambians, who were intended to take up positions in the newly established Tanzania-Zambia Railway Authority (TAZARA). But TAZARA was a semi-official body funded out of the slender resources of the Tanzanian and Zambian governments, and the freshly qualified Africans soon found that they could earn higher salaries working for private companies. They abandoned the railway and took their skills elsewhere.*

Also, in the immediate period after the first generation of Chinese leadership passed away (Mao Zedong and Zhu Enlai, the architects of China's then foreign policy), China's new leaders under the command of Deng Xiaoping drastically reduced China's willingness "to distribute charity to backward countries half-way around the world" because China itself "was desperately short of professional skills" after the ravages of the cultural revolution (Snow, 1988, 169).

However, after China had adopted reform and opened its doors to the world, the number of African students coming to the PRC increased greatly (see Figure 1). The graph shows a constant annual increase in numbers. Statistically, this means that there are no factors slowing down the number of African students coming to the PRC. In the past ten years, China has significantly increased the number of government scholarships to African students "in a bid to step up youth exchanges and lay a solid foundation for friendly future China-Africa ties."<sup>27</sup>

In the five-year period beginning in 2001, the number of Chinese government scholarships tripled. While in 2001 there were 1,224 scholarships granted to African students, by 2006 that number had increased to 3,737 (see Figures 2 and 3).<sup>28</sup> With respect to field of study, among 2,757 African

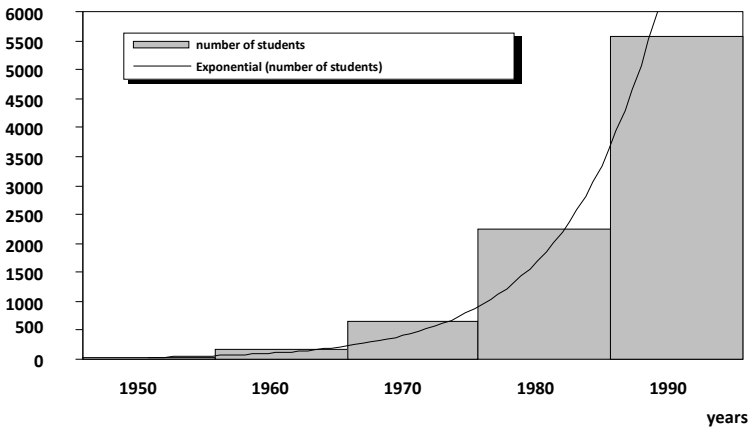
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<sup>27</sup> "China vows to increase government scholarships for African students." *Xinhua*, 21 April 2011, accessed on 2 August 2011, available at: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/201104/21/\\_138.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/201104/21/_138.htm).

<sup>28</sup> More African students coming to Chinese universities, *Xinhua*, 17 December 2007, accessed on 2 August 2011, available at:

students enrolled at various Chinese universities in 2005, 29 percent were studying technology and engineering, 21 percent Chinese language, 13 percent medical and pharmaceutical sciences, 9 percent management, and 28 percent another major discipline (agriculture, public administration, economy, etc.). In 2010, China promised to continue to raise the number of Chinese government scholarships, with a goal of 5,500 to be offered to Africans by 2012.<sup>29</sup>

**Figure 1. African students studying in the PRC on Chinese Government Scholarships (1950–2000)**



Source: China's Ministry of Education (Li, 2008)

[http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/200712/17/content\\_6325471.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/200712/17/content_6325471.htm).

<sup>29</sup> For the past half-century, China has provided multiple exchanges and scholarships to African students with the dual purpose of training personnel for African countries and promoting educational cooperation and communication between China and Africa. According to incomplete statistics, among returning African students in recent years there have been eight individuals who have served their countries in leadership positions such as Minister or above, eight who served as ambassadors or counselors to China, six who served as Secretary, President, or Prime Minister, and three who served as the Secretary-General of Associations to promote their country's friendly relations with China (LI Wei, 2011).

**Figure 2. African students who received Chinese Government Scholarships (2001–2006)**

Year	Number of African students
2001	1224
2002	1646
2003	1793
2004	2214
2005	2757
2006	3737
Total	<b>13371</b>

Source: China's Ministry of Education (Li, 2008)

Although most African students migrate on the basis of having been awarded a Chinese government scholarship, there are also some self-funded students and some who are funded by African governments and international organizations. Their numbers have grown considerably in recent years; whereas in 1989 there were only two self-financed sub-Saharan students in the PRC, in the 1990s over nineteen hundred African students were enrolled in Chinese universities at their own expense.

Aside from the enrollment of African students in both undergraduate and graduate university programs, China has also held seminars, training courses, and conferences for African professionals, public workers, and officials, mainly concentrating on fields such as management capabilities, engineering skills, and school administration.

Another good example of China's involvement in education on the African continent is the Chinese government's extensive program of agricultural training for Africans.<sup>30</sup> Since 2000, when the First Ministerial Conference of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation was held in Beijing, China has intensified its agricultural cooperation with African

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<sup>30</sup> To learn more about China-Africa agricultural cooperation and student exchange, see Brautigam, 2009.

countries. The Chinese government has sponsored the building of specialized laboratories and agricultural testing fields in a number of African countries and has also launched faculty and student exchange programs. Thus, in the past several years, about 15 thousand Africans have taken part in China-supported training programs and seminars. Most seminars last about a month and are topic-oriented. The list of seminar topics includes economic management of agricultural production chains, eco-agriculture, grain storage technology, agricultural irrigation technology, agricultural machinery, and modern agricultural education. In addition to lectures, the trainees also visit experimental Chinese fields (Yu, 2011).

The China Agricultural University in Beijing managed ten seminars between 2001 and 2006, training 206 experts, scholars, and officials from Africa (Li Anshan, 2008). In 2005, the Tianjin University of Technology and Education set up the Center for African Vocational Education Studies to train midrange engineering professionals from Africa.<sup>31</sup> At the 2009 Forum on China-Africa cooperation in Egypt, China promised to send fifty agricultural technology teams to Africa and to help train two thousand agricultural technicians for African countries between 2009 and 2012. China also promised to increase the total number of agricultural technology demonstration centers built for African countries to twenty and announced an impressive list of other new initiatives in various domains. For example, in the education sector, China promised to “help African countries build fifty China-Africa friendship schools, admit two hundred middle and high-level African administrative personnel to MPA programs in China, increase the number of scholarships offered to Africa to 5,500, [and] help African countries train 1,500 school

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<sup>31</sup> In recent years, this center has trained more than two hundred students from Africa (Wang, 2005, 20).

headmasters.”<sup>32</sup> All of these goals were to be accomplished over a three-year period from 2009 to 2012.

The profile of the average African migrant in China is that of a single man, between the ages of twenty and thirty-five, with a relatively high level of education (some respondents had been in higher education, and many had finished high school) (Li Zhigang et. al, 2008). Although there are more men than women in the African community in China (among the respondents, approximately 70 percent were male and 30 percent were female), the proportion of women in the overall migration flow is quite high and is steadily growing.<sup>33</sup> Women’s motivations for migrating are rather diverse and cannot always be neatly arranged in gender-related categories. Though most women come with male partners or follow their partners after they have established a stable livelihood in the host country, others develop migration projects on their own.<sup>34</sup> For many, leaving the home country is an escape from family constraints and pressures such as complicated intergenerational relations and bad marriages. In other cases, a woman may migrate as part of a family migration strategy, for example when there is no suitable male candidate available or when the woman’s migration is more profitable or less risky to the family’s future than that of her male counterpart (Pina-Guerassimoff, 2006, 17–32).

Most Africans in China seem to have emigrated from West African countries (see Figure 3) such as Nigeria, Mali, Ghana, or Guinea (Bodomo, 2010, 699). According to statistics, Nigerians dominate the total flow (Le Bail, 2009, 6).

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<sup>32</sup> Forum on China-Africa Cooperation Sharm El Sheikh Action Plan (2010-2012), accessed on 22 Feb. 2012, available at <http://www./eng/ltada/dsjobzjhy/hywj/t626387.htm>

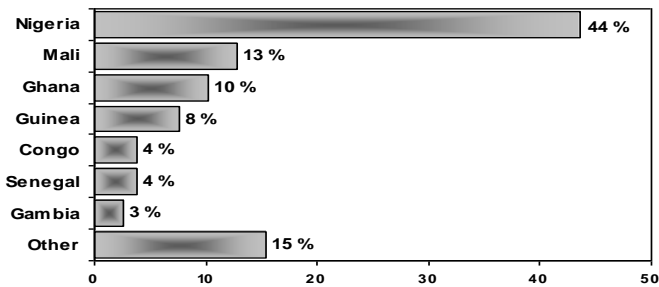
<sup>33</sup> The feminization of migration waves is a recent worldwide phenomenon. For more information, see Zlotnik, 2003.

<sup>34</sup> According to some migration scholars, this is a classical chain-migration scenario that is helping households to minimize risk. Until a reliable livelihood is created in the host country, the woman stays at home to maintain a basic business or state job with benefits to fall back on in case her partner’s migration project fails (Nyiri, 2007).

This is in part because Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa, with a total population in 2010 estimated to be over 155 million.<sup>35</sup>

As for a migrant's level of education, some of the respondents come from a middle-class family background and have attended universities in their home countries or hold Chinese university degrees. Most of the Africans interviewed have had some basic education, with at least a primary or junior high school diploma.<sup>36</sup>

**Figure 3. Geographic Origins of African Migrants in China**



Source: Bodomo, 2010, 700.

Surveys show that most migrants came to China after 1998, but few of them were living there on a permanent basis: only 2 percent had lived in China for more than five years, while 5 percent had been there for between three and five years, and 34 percent between one and three years. The overwhelming majority—59 percent—had stayed in China less than one year (Li Zhigang et. al, 2008, 15–16). English

<sup>35</sup> Country Comparison: Population (2010). *CIA The World Factbook*, accessed on 15 August 2011, available at <https://www.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ni.html>.

<sup>36</sup> According to a study conducted by a group of Chinese researchers, 16 percent of African migrants in China have had less than six years of schooling, 43 percent have had six to nine years, 23 percent ten to twelve years, and 18 percent thirteen to sixteen years (Li Zhigang et. al, 2008, 15).

and French are the main languages within the African community in China, along with Arabic and Chinese. The latter is used not only in communication with locals but also when there is no other language in common.

Although there is a certain African presence in the cities of Shanghai, Beijing, and Hong Kong, African traders and entrepreneurs have gathered mainly in two Chinese cities: Guangzhou and Yiwu. These are strategic points in the Southern China manufacturing area, where goods are sent directly from neighboring factories. These cities are internationally known for their wholesale markets and fairs, where a wide range of goods can be found and purchased—especially light industry products.<sup>37</sup> Within and around Guangzhou, there are two major areas of African settlement: Sanyuanli and Huanshidong (Xiaobei).<sup>38</sup> Sanyuanli (三元里) is mostly populated by traders from Nigeria and Ghana, while Xiaobei (小北) is home to migrants originating from the Middle East (Yemen and Jordan), from Islamic African countries, and from areas such as Mali, Senegal, Guinea, and Northern Nigeria.

These two districts have several large trade buildings where a wide range of small shops is located. Owned by African migrants, these shops are especially popular among short-term traders from Africa who are unable to purchase the necessary goods on the Chinese wholesale markets due to lack of time and connections as well as to poor Chinese language proficiency. These stores are stuffed to capacity—

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<sup>37</sup> The province of Guangdong alone represents more than 30 percent of China's annual exports. One-third of these exports are made during the Chinese Import and Export Commodities Fair (CIECF), held in Guangzhou twice a year. Yiwu, which is located in an industrial cluster approximately 380 km from Shanghai and 250 km from Ningbo port (main Chinese ports in terms of goods' traffic), offers African traders even lower prices than those in Guangzhou. There are eight large sectors that have developed in Yiwu: wool, shirts, socks, accessories, zippers, toys, key sticks, and printing (Le Bail, 2009, 7).

<sup>38</sup> For a more detailed description of Guangzhou districts inhabited by African migrants, see LI Zhigang et. al, 2008, 8–10).

often piled to the ceiling—with clothing and other products. The goods come from one of several Chinese wholesale markets in Guangzhou or sometimes directly from the factory. The shops are often so full that the owners have no place to stand, so they occupy nearby public rest areas or corridors. Samples of goods for sale are displayed at the front of the store. These include many kinds of clothing, hand bags, shoes, electronics, cosmetics, and perfumes. Aside from the shops, there are also some small African restaurants and cafés, hairdressing salons, trading agencies, and illegal money-exchange stores.

Most African migrants interviewed identified themselves as businessmen or traders, though some labeled themselves also artists, housewives, and persons of liberal professions (Bodomo, 2010, 699; Li Zhigang et. al, 2008, 15). Indeed, the majority of Africans in China work in trade, the import-export business, and wholesale. Some have their own small or medium sized companies; others are employees or trade agents of larger trade structures or middlemen between African clients and Chinese factories.

Previous studies describe multiple professional trajectories and economic profiles of Africans in China that can be grouped into five major categories:

- older-generation pioneer entrepreneurs who went to China in the early 1980s–90s and whose businesses have evolved from simple import-export activities to transnational companies with commercial networks in Asia and Africa;
- former students who have decided to stay in China after receiving their degrees and who have since launched their own businesses;
- Africans who have settled in China on a more or less permanent basis and who act as middlemen or trade agents between Africa-based entrepreneurs and Chinese factories;
- recently landed traders who travel between China and their home countries on a regular basis, purchasing wholesale goods in Guangzhou and Yiwu and selling them in Africa;
- migrants who are not involved in trade but are engaged in intercommunity services such as catering,



accommodation, hairdressing, etc. (Bertoncello and Bredeloup, 2007, 9).

This categorization is rather formal; in reality most African migrants in China combine many diverse occupations. Almost all Africans in China are engaged to some degree in one or more commercial activities such as purchasing and selling goods, warehousing, container loading, or shipping. In addition, most are involved in providing various kinds of services such as market guiding, product sourcing, networking, customs brokerage, accommodation arrangements, translation, or airport pickup.

African migrants' itineraries in China can be quite varied. For example, those who started out as shuttle traders between Guangzhou and Bamako or Abuja may have later decided to settle down in China to supervise purchase and shipment of goods. Some have gradually developed their businesses by investing in other activities, while others have converted themselves into intermediaries or market guides.

## **African Migrants and Chinese Society**

China has long been a source of emigration to the rest of the world, but with its booming economy, the direction of human traffic has started to shift. In the past forty years, China has become a destination for thousands of immigrants. These newcomers arrive especially from neighboring countries such as Japan, South and North Korea, and Russia, but also from distant lands and regions. Upon arrival they settle in large Chinese cities, where new ethnic communities are rapidly emerging.

Unfortunately, however, China's immigration system has not kept pace with these changes. This complaint is shared by almost all African diplomats in Beijing.<sup>39</sup> As immigration law in China is not easily accessible to foreigners and is constantly modified without notification, the system is quite chaotic and open to abuse. Recently Beijing started drafting the first immigration law in the history of the PRC.<sup>40</sup> Regularizing the rigid, conservative system is urgently needed as many migrants who come to China with valid documents and want to extend their stay or change their migration status often lack the means to do so.

Africans who are part of this population movement experience various problems with local police and authorities while trying to officially register their companies, rent commercial premises or residential apartments, or pass customs (Osno, 2009). Aside from students and official representatives, most African traders enter China on three-month tourist visas, regardless of the duration of their stay. This type of visa is very difficult to renew; one has to use the services of Chinese agents and obscure middlemen who expect high

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<sup>39</sup> Interview conducted in Beijing, May 2011.

<sup>40</sup> In 2005, the country launched a pilot policy similar to that of the U.S. "green card," which would permit foreigners with substantial investments, connections, and time spent in China to apply for a long-term residence permit. However, this experiment was quickly put to an end, as the admission criteria formulated by Chinese administrations were too severe and difficult to satisfy to be an effective long-term solution (Yang, Wang, and Liu, 2009).

commissions. According to our interviewees, a one-year visa extension will cost an African applicant between 20 and 35 thousand RMB (approximately US\$3–5 thousand). As a result, many overstay the terms of their visas or simply switch passports in their home countries and return under new names. Others try to enroll in small provincial Chinese universities or find positions as English teachers in remote Chinese cities to legalize their stay. Those who have requested a residence permit—Africans who have married Chinese nationals or started local businesses with Chinese partners—have to renew their documents four times a year, facing long waits and high renewal fees (Law, 2010).

While describing their relationships with the Chinese in everyday life, many African migrants mention that they often experience prejudice; they encounter racist and xenophobic attitudes among the local Chinese. Indeed, compared to most foreigners arriving in China as investors or white-collar employees, Africans are perceived to be “different” in terms of ethnicity, nationality, language, and culture. These differences influence the way the Chinese react to the new migration phenomenon. Current Chinese perceptions of Africans settling in the PRC seem to be dominated by the images and stereotypes carried by the mass media. The dominant Chinese media often portrays Africans as starved people living in hard conditions, mainly in the desert, with HIV/IDS or as beneficiaries of aid from richer nations. The images and stories shown in the media have gradually become part of Chinese conventional wisdom or “common knowledge,” contributing to a narrow perception of Africans in China.

According to one of the African students interviewed in Beijing, the most common stereotypes of African behavior listed by the Chinese are unpleasant smell, noisiness, violence, drunkenness, crime, and sexual harassment of local women:

When I came to China I started to feel what racism is. At first I was kind of lost really. After being here for a while, I just said to myself, I shouldn't care about it that much. Because, on one hand, you could say it is racism the way they treat you, the way they

look at you, the way they talk about you. But on the other hand, you might think it is just curiosity, maybe. They don't get to see black people that much. You can see some of them want to touch your hair, touch you, they want to feel if you're sticky, this kind of thing.<sup>41</sup>

As this African student noted, Chinese attitudes could be the result of lack of exposure and of insufficient knowledge of African histories and civilizations. Though the China-Africa strategic partnership is highly publicized by official Chinese media, the information flow is mainly focused on China's involvement in Africa—not the other way around. For instance, during the 2006 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in Beijing, there was very little communication on African culture or history, and the welcoming concert broadcast by Chinese television was almost entirely composed of Chinese performing artists.

The negative perception and discriminatory treatment of African migrants in China recently resulted in an open protest among Africans living in Guangzhou. The protest erupted in July 2009 after one African migrant died jumping out of a building to escape police who were making surprise passport and visa checks. Approximately two hundred African migrants surrounded a local police station and stopped traffic outside, protesting against the tightening of visa controls, frequent police harassment and extortion, lack of legal protection for foreigners, and the absence of clearly defined immigration regulations. This protest attracted a lot of attention both locally and internationally; several African embassies dispatched their representatives to investigate the matter.<sup>42</sup> Thus the African community in China suddenly became an issue that could no longer be ignored in Sino-African relations.

Many African migrants in China feel that they do not have a clearly defined place in the social hierarchy of Chinese society and, despite being more or less integrated

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<sup>41</sup> Interview conducted in African embassies in Beijing, May 2008.

<sup>42</sup> Interview conducted in African embassies in Beijing, May 2011.

linguistically, they cannot yet accept, approve, or endorse Chinese culture, values, and traditions. However, African migration to China is still a very recent phenomenon. Adams Bodomo's research in Guangzhou showed that the African community there is still very much "steeped in African culture in terms of how people identify themselves, what friends they choose, what cultural activities they engage in, and what they eat (Bodomo, 2010, 704–705)." Nonetheless, the African community in China is quickly developing, and African migrants settling in China are slowly being influenced by the Chinese society in which they are embedded:

Don't give up just because you aren't getting what you want. First year, especially the first few months, was tough. Getting used to food and the place, you don't know the language. [While communicating with the Chinese] I had to use a body language, gestures, make some sounds for them to understand—chicken, not beef. There is a lot of stress. You think all the time of going back home but at the end, you'll work yourself out. In the beginning it's hard. But then, when you know the people, they are better than you think. They are welcoming, they are willing to help. You can get used to the food and the weather. And when you'll finally go home, you'll miss China.<sup>43</sup>

Being a multi-ethnic country, China needs to promote a tolerant attitude vis-à-vis ethnically diverse communities to enable the development of cross-cultural interaction and communication and to prevent possible tensions and conflicts. The Chinese government should adopt clearly defined immigration laws and regulations to better manage the increasing number of immigrants and to address their need for a legitimate and secure environment, especially relating to ethnic cultures and customs, employment and education.

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<sup>43</sup> Interview conducted in Shanghai, 2009.

## Conclusion

Modern China is globally connected and has a rapidly developing economy that has attracted numerous migrants from all over the world, including Africa. Some Africans come to do business and enjoy Chinese commercial and investment opportunities; others come to work as high-level professionals and managers; or they choose China as a place to study and earn a degree. Despite the increasing flow of migrants into China, the emergence of an African community in China has received little scholarly attention. This is surprising given the booming development of Sino-African bilateral economic and political relationships.

Although the African presence in China can be traced back to the early fifteenth century when Admiral Zheng He's ships first appeared near the African coast, the current African community in China is a rather recent phenomenon and is closely related to the PRC's policy—launched near the end of 1970s by Deng Xiaoping—of reform and opening to the outside world. The core of the expatriate African community in China is composed of students, recipients of Chinese government scholarships who stayed in China after obtaining their degrees; and transnational African traders who set up businesses in Southern China's major manufacturing and wholesale centers—especially in the cities of Guangzhou and Yiwu.

Over time, this first wave of African migrants has been joined by other migrants, mostly merchants and import-export entrepreneurs, who came to China for only a short period of time to purchase manufactured goods they could sell back in Africa—items such as textiles, shoes, computers, home appliances, mobile phones, and furniture. Some of them became middlemen between African clients and Chinese factories, helping fellow Africans find the required products and ship them back to Africa. Others acted as intermediaries between Chinese businesses and African local communities and authorities searching for investors in domains such as construction, agriculture, mineral resource exploitation, and energy supply, thus playing an important role in the development of their home regions. Africans in China

constitute a diverse community; they come from various geographical origins and educational levels but represent an unbalanced gender ratio. The process of their emergence as a community has been rather complex and tension-filled.

Despite their growing presence in China, African migrants are still far from being well integrated into the host society. Due to negative stereotypes sometimes spread by the Chinese media, African migrants in China face various problems in their interactions with the local population and administration, ranging from cultural misunderstandings to openly racist attitudes and discriminatory practices. In the absence of clearly defined immigration laws and regulations, Africans have a dubious legal status in China; they live and work in precarious conditions and are frequent targets of police checks.

Navigating between their countries of origin and China, these African migrants, whose numbers have been rapidly increasing within the past ten years, have created strong economic, political, and cultural ties between the two regions, thus becoming an important dimension of the China-Africa strategic partnership and exchange.

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