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The Wits China-Africa Reporting Project was conceived in 2009 because of a realisation that despite the growing economic, social and political links between China and Africa, journalism did not seem to be adequately keeping pace. While research into China-Africa relations was burgeoning, it became apparent that both the quantity and depth of media reporting fell way short of the magnitude of the engagements.

Reporting was also often polarised, depicting China as either a malicious predator to be mistrusted or a generous friend and partner brimming with win-win rhetoric. African media particularly is at the forefront of two competing ideological factions, wedged between the Western media’s often fear-based narrative of neo-colonialism and exploitation, and China’s sanitised official propaganda machine.

We wanted to help journalists cut through the rhetoric, stereotypes and generalisations and find a way to access the real stories defining China-Africa relations on the ground. Crucially, the Wits China-Africa Reporting Project was not looking to promote a specific agenda, focusing on either positive or negative stories about China’s influence in Africa. Our key objective was to try to improve the capacity of journalists to understand and reflect the rapidly changing dynamics – to promote good journalism.

So rather than merely focusing on academic research, the Journalism Department at the University of the Witwatersrand set up the Wits China-Africa Reporting Project as a practical response, linking directly with journalists from both Africa and China with the goal of enhancing evidence-based journalistic endeavours.

Recognising that journalists are the prism through which the broader public comes to understand issues, we asked the journalists to suggest stories that they thought needed telling, or indeed further investigation, and offered reporting grants to help with research expenses.

With the generous support of the Open Society Foundation, the project has been able to offer reporting grants to more than 50 journalists. For five consecutive years from 2010 the project has hosted a group of Chinese journalists at Wits Journalism’s annual Power Reporting African Investigative Journalism Conference in Johannesburg, and provided logistical and financial assistance for each journalist to travel to an African country of their choice to investigate a story for their audiences in China.

The young Chinese journalists have visited more than a dozen African capitals and headed far off the beaten track, interviewing fishermen in Turkana, gold miners in Ghana and farm workers on Chinese-owned farms.

African journalists too have been supported in their efforts to find out the truth behind ‘the Chinese’ in their local areas. While they often started out expecting to unearth evidence of exploitation and blatant opportunism, it soon becomes apparent that this topic is always more complicated than it at first seems; the stories often did not turn out as expected and there are rarely simple conclusions. But it always proves an interesting and useful exercise; by accessing the voices of the Chinese and African actors on the ground, we unearth the nuance and insights that offer a better understanding of the potential and pitfalls of the China-Africa relationship.

Aside from the reporting grants scheme, the project has also supported an in-depth Wits student project focused on ‘Chinese Joburg’, and forged collaborative investigative ventures with the Forum of African Investigative Reporters (FAIR) and the Oxpeckers Centre for Environmental Investigative Journalism, where we hosted two Chinese environmental journalists in South Africa for three months to probe Chinese links to the wildlife trafficking saga.
This first volume features some of the best articles produced by Chinese and African journalists with China-Africa Reporting Project grants from 2009 to 2014. In four sections, the 17 articles range over and between the two regions, from new players in South Sudan to veteran traders in Soweto; from migrants and marriages in Guangzhou to gold miners in Ghana.

The first section, Opportunities in Development, sets the scene by looking at how China is having a fundamental economic impact in four African countries. After travelling to South Sudan in 2012, South African journalists Kevin Bloom and Richard Poplak describe life in Juba, Africa’s newest capital city, and note the presence and key role played by China. Next, after visiting Angola in 2014, Namibian journalist John Grobler explores discrete deals between Chinese and local companies to gain control of Angolan railways and to access natural resources in the DRC’s Katanga province.

In March 2014 Ugandan journalist Frederick Mugira documented the high hopes among locals in south western Uganda for Chinese investment to revive copper mines that have not been active since 1982. Lastly, Hu Jianlong is a Chinese journalist who participated in the Wits China-Africa Reporting Project tour to Africa in 2013 during which he investigated Chinese investments in Zambia. His article included in this volume explores the continuity and change inherent in Chinese companies’ arrival and expanding operations in Zambia.

The second section, Learning and Adapting, explores adaptations, experiments and new directions in the China-Africa relationship. For his article on China’s ‘dragon head companies’ in East Africa, Kenyan journalist, scholar and former Wits China-Africa Reporting Project research associate Bob Wekesa interviewed diplomats, scholars, corporate executives, and managers of aid projects in China and Africa, revealing how the operations of Chinese companies in the region have expanded and evolved. Next, Chinese journalist Liu Hongqiao explores the novel and ongoing project aiming to rewild endangered South China tigers in South Africa’s Free State province. In 2013 Liu was awarded an environmental journalism fellowship with the Wits China-Africa Reporting Project in collaboration with the Oxpeckers Centre for Investigative Environmental Journalists, based in Nelspruit on the border of the Kruger National Park. This article was produced by Liu during her three-month stay in South Africa for the fellowship.

In 2014 Ugandan journalist Haggai Matsiko used a Wits China-Africa Reporting Project grant to travel to South Sudan and the DRC to report on China’s growing interest to expand its role in peace and security operations in the region and on the continent as a whole. Lastly, as a member of the 2013 Wits Journalism Honours class that undertook an in-depth project on the Chinese community in Johannesburg, Shandukani Mulaudzi investigates the growth of Chinese-owned malls in Johannesburg and how their retail model is adapting in the local environment.

The third section, Issues of Contention, deals with more controversial and problematic aspects of the China-Africa relationship. Huang Hongxiang is another Chinese journalist who was awarded an environmental journalism fellowship with the Wits China-Africa Reporting Project in 2013, and his article included here investigates Chinese nationals and local officials involved in ivory smuggling in Mozambique. Then Yang Meng, a well-known Chinese investigative journalist based in Beijing, reports at length on the Chinese gold miners that left poor prospects behind in China and moved to Ghana, where they have a complicated relationship with local officials and competitors, who accuse the Chinese of bringing environmental problems in their wake.

With a Wits China-Africa Reporting Project grant, South China Morning Post journalist Jenni Marsh visited Guangzhou in 2014 to research Afro-Chinese marriages, illustrating the controversy still surrounding them and the challenges faced by African migrants in the city. Lastly, awarded a Wits China-Africa Reporting Project grant in 2014 to examine the role of Chinese medicine in Uganda, James Wan produced an in-depth account of a multi-level pyramid scheme associated with Chinese traditional medicine operated by a Chinese company in Uganda.

The fourth and last section, Migrating and Engaging, explores how individuals have been drawn between the two regions by new opportunities to learn and make a living. Chinese journalist Chen Xiaochen participated in the Wits China-Africa Reporting Project tour to Africa in 2011, and travelled to Tanzania to report on the intrepid Chinese farmers who set up a sisal farm there. Then, after travelling to Beijing in 2013 to investigate China’s scholarship programme for African students, South African journalist Simon Allison reports on the Chinese scholarship programme for African students and the latter’s views on living and studying in China.

Next, two articles produced by members of Wits Journalism’s 2013 Honours project on the Chinese community in Johannesburg: Dineo Bendile profiles professional Chinese expats in South Africa and look at how their business, leisure and sometimes family have developed in the local context; and Ray Mahlaka documents the Chinese community in
Soweto, including old settlers as well as new arrivals. Lastly, after travelling to Guangzhou in 2013 with a Wits China-Africa Reporting Project grant as part of a migration project looking at trading communities in China, journalist Sam Piranty meets the ‘economic nomads’, i.e. highly mobile African businessmen operating in and passing through the city.

By exploring real stories at ground level and navigating polarised debates, we feel the journalism in this volume is able to enhance our understanding of what is a complex and dynamic China-Africa relationship. This volume does not aim to be a definitive account of all the issues but should rather be considered a snapshot of a period of immense change in China-Africa dynamics, and a reflection of journalists’ attempts to understand and make sense of these changes.

I would like to thank my colleagues for assisting me in producing this volume, notably Bob Wekesa, Barry van Wyk, Raymond Mpubani and Anton Harber, Caxton Professor of Journalism and head of the Wits Journalism department.

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For updates on grants and opportunities visit www.journalism.co.za/chinaafrica or follow the project blog at china-africa-reporting.co.za and on Twitter @witschinaafrica.
GLOSSARY AND ABBREVIATIONS

AFRICOM: The United States Africa Command, one of nine Unified Combatant Commands of the United States Armed Forces, responsible for US military operations and military relations with 53 African nations.

AMISOM: Regional peacekeeping mission operated by the African Union with the approval of the United Nations in Somalia since 2007.


AVIC: Aviation Industry Corporation, Chinese state-owned aerospace and defence company.

AU: African Union.

BRICS: Association of five major emerging economies: Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. Since 2010 the five member nations have met annually at formal summits.


CADF: China-Africa Development Fund, also known as CAD Fund, a Chinese private equity fund backed by China Development Bank. Founded in 2007 after mentioned by then Chinese President Hu Jintao as one of eight new measures to enhance Sino-African relations at the Beijing FOCAC summit in November 2006.

CAR: Central African Republic.

CATIC: China National Aero-Technology International Engineering Company, Chinese state-owned enterprise (affiliated with AVIC) focused on engineering contracting, real estate development, and trade and labour services.

CCB: China Construction Bank.

CCS: Chambishi Copper Smelter Co., Ltd, owned by China Nonferrous Metal Mining (Group) Co., Ltd., and Yunnan Metallurgical Group General Company, located in Chambishi, Zambia.

CCTV: China Central Television, state television broadcaster in China.

Cedi: Ghana cedi (currency sign: GH; currency code: GHS), the unit of currency of Ghana.

CNADC: China National Agricultural Development Group Company, Chinese state-owned company focused on pelagic fishing; fish products processing; and agricultural resource exploitation services.

CPA: Comprehensive Peace Agreement, a set of agreements culminating in January 2005 that were signed between the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM) and the Government of Sudan.

CFB: Caminho de Ferro de Benguela, the Benguela Railway linking the Atlantic port of Lobito in Angola to the eastern border town of Luau and a branch of the Katanga Railway accessing mining areas of the DRC and Zambia.
China Export Import Bank, one of three institutional banks in China chartered to implement state policies, distinguished by its role as the sole provider of Chinese government concessional loans.

CIF: China International Fund, a Chinese-owned group of Hong Kong investors that describes its major businesses as including “large-scale national reconstruction projects and infrastructure construction in developing countries”.

CNMC: China Non-Ferrous Metal Mining Corporation, Chinese state-owned mining company.

CNPC: China National Petroleum Corporation, Chinese state-owned oil and gas corporation.


CSR: Corporate Social Responsibility.

CUC: Communication University of China, located in Beijing.

DRC: The Democratic Republic of Congo.

DTI: South African Department of Trade and Industry.


ESCOM: The Escom Group, describes itself as one of the largest private investors in Angola. Founded in 1993 by the Espirito Santo Group and Helder Bataglia, reportedly sold to the Angolan state oil group Sonangol in 2011.

EU: European Union.

EUTM: EU Training Mission Somalia, a training operation for the Somali Armed Forces conducted by military officials from European Union states since 2010.

FOCAC: Forum on China Africa Co-operation, an official forum between the People’s Republic of China and the states in Africa.

G77: Group of 77, a loose coalition of developing nations aimed at promoting members’ collective economic interests and creating an enhanced joint negotiating capacity in the United Nations. By November 2013 had expanded to 134 member countries.

GDP: Gross Domestic Product.

GNPOC: Greater Nile Petroleum Operating Company, a petroleum exploration and production company operating in Sudan; CNPC holds a 40% ownership stake.

Group Areas Act: Group Areas Act of 1950: Apartheid legislation enacted in the South African parliament designed to assign racial groups to different residential and business sections in urban areas in South Africa.

HR: Human Resources.


JEM: Justice and Equality Movement, an armed opposition group in the western region of Darfur in Sudan.

KCCCL: Kasai Cobalt Company Limited, a cobalt mining project at Kilembe Copper Mine, Uganda.

KCM: Konkola Copper Mines Plc, the largest copper mining company in Zambia.

KLM: Kilembe Mines Limited, a copper mining company in Kilembe, Uganda.

LAPSSET: Lamu Port Southern Sudan-Ethiopia Transport Corridor project, a US$24 billion transport and infrastructure scheme announced by the Kenyan government in early 2012 to link Kenya with South Sudan and Ethiopia.

M23: March 23 Movement, also known as the Congolese Revolutionary Army, a rebel group in the DRC that surrendered in November 2013.

Metical: Mozambican metical (currency sign: MZN or MTn), the unit of currency of Mozambique.

MUNUSCO: United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the DRC.

NGO: Non-governmental organization.

NPC: The National People's Congress is the national legislature of the People's Republic of China, with an annual sitting in March.
NPP: New Patriotic Party, a liberal democratic and liberal conservative party in Ghana and one of the two dominant parties in Ghanaian politics.

PLA: People's Liberation Army, the national armed forces of the People's Republic of China.

PSB: Public Security Bureau, a government office serving as police forces in the People's Republic of China.

RMB: Renminbi, Chinese currency. Also known as yuan or colloquially in Chinese, kuai.

SALW: Small Arms and Lights Weapons.

SARS: South African Revenue Service.

SASAC: State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission, a special commission in the People's Republic of China responsible for managing state-owned enterprizes, including appointing executives and approving any mergers or sales of stock or assets.

SFA: China State Forestry Administration.

Sinopec: China Petroleum & Chemical Corporation, or Sinopec Limited, a Chinese oil and gas company based in Beijing.


SNCC: Société des Chemin de Fer du Congo, the national railway company for the inland railways of the DRC.

Soweto: An urban area of the city of Johannesburg in Gauteng, South Africa, the name is an English abbreviation for South Western Townships.


SPLA: Sudan People's Liberation Army.

SPLM: Sudan People's Liberation Movement, the ruling political party headed by President Salva Kiir in South Sudan.

State Council: The chief administrative authority of the People's Republic of China, i.e. China's Cabinet.

Tazara: The Tazara Railway links the port of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania with the town of Kapiri Mposhi in Zambia's Central Province; constructed between 1970 to 1975 and financed and supported by the People's Republic of China.

TPAWU: Tanzania Plantation and Agricultural Workers Union.

UNMISS: United Nations Mission in South Sudan, a UN peacekeeping mission for South Sudan established on 8 July 2011.


USAID: United States Agency for International Development, the US Government agency primarily responsible for administering civilian foreign aid.

Xinhua: Xinhua News Agency, the official press agency of the People's Republic of China.
SECTION 1

OPPORTUNITIES IN DEVELOPMENT
FEEDING FRENZY IN SOUTH SUDAN

By Kevin Bloom & Richard Poplak

First published in the Mail & Guardian on 21 December 2012

For seven years, award-winning non-fiction writers KEVIN BLOOM and RICHARD POPLAK traversed an Africa in the throes of seismic change on a mission to uncover the forces that are reshaping the continent. They dubbed this era ‘Africa 3.0’, a new age in Africa’s evolution, brought about by the confluence of two momentous phenomena – the disengagement of African governments from the neoliberal sphere, and the advance of the Chinese. Bloom and Poplak have visited 16 countries and conducted more than 500 interviews, a roster that’s included heads of state, diplomats, businessmen, soldiers and rebels. They received a Wits China-Africa Reporting Project grant in 2012 to travel to Africa’s newest country, South Sudan, as it began its journey towards development and the rest of the world scrambled for a piece of the pie. Their book, Continental Shift, is due for international release in early 2016.

We wake early for the televised election. The Afex River Camp, situated on the banks of the White Nile, passes for luxury in the world’s newest capital. Fist-sized insects thwack against our US$125-per-night containers, where we lie like refrigerated produce. We disable our phone alarms and stumble into the bilious light of a parking lot. CNN blares in the shadows on the far side.

It is a Wednesday in November, during one of those weeks that creak under the weight of historical significance. As we enter the kitchenette belonging to the International Republican Institute, the Grand US Republican Party’s pet non-governmental organisation, vote counting is already underway for the contest between President Barack Obama and his challenger, Mitt Romney. A day later, China’s 18th Party Congress will begin the process of installing Xi Jinping as its new leader, determining the course of the world’s second largest economy for the coming decade. In Juba, principal city of a recently independent South Sudan, these events seem both portentous and menacing. Geopolitical alliances here shift with the inclement weather.

“South Africans!” says Billy, brightly, when we enter the boardroom. “My drinking buddies from Iraq were South Africans!” Billy is one of the Republican faithful, an army reservist and psychological operations specialist whose halcyon days were spent in Mosul. “A free-fire zone, man!” he says of the place. “No cameras, no media. Just us and the bad guys.”

Here, Billy is a babysitter for the young Americans who preach freedom and democracy to President Salva Kiir’s ruling Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM). As we eat our way through egg sandwiches and hash browns, the Electoral College numbers pile up for the Democrat incumbent, and the mood in the room sours.

“Our job is to help build capacity for legislators, and to try encourage working, functional opposition parties,”
Kevin Bloom and Richard Poplak

says James Turitto, Resident Programme Officer, and the morning’s chief egg fryer. “We’re very close to the SPLM. So when senior members tell us they’re going to Beijing for 10 days, it’s a little tough for us to swallow. Truthfully, USAID and State are worried about the path the SPLM are taking. You could see how China would appeal to them.”

Conversely, we can see how South Sudan would appeal to the Chinese, the Americans, and the dozens of others circling the region with vulpine intent. “Everyone wants a piece of the pie that is Juba, South Sudan,” wrote Kenyan investigative journalist Wanjohi Kabukuru in a paper published by Norwegian People’s Aid.

Since independence from Sudan on 9 July, 2011, Kiir’s government has been locked in a dispute over oil revenues with Khartoum, a stalemate that’s led to the cessation of oil exports and the implosion of the economy. Oil, when it is pumping, traditionally accounts for 98% of the South Sudanese budget. But oil is only one element in the dizzying compound of economic possibilities that South Sudan represents. There is almost no infrastructural development here: few paved roads; no electricity grid; a non-existent sanitation system.

Independence referendum

The vacuum promises untold riches. According to a 48-page dossier titled The New Frontier, commissioned by Norwegian People’s Aid and written by David Kuol Mading, the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between north and south in 2005 kicked off a land grab. Foreign interests now control 5.74 million hectares of land in the South Sudanese agribusiness sector alone – almost 9% of the country’s landmass. South African companies have had a field day: SAB Miller pumped R354 million into South Sudan Beverages Limited (tagline: “The taste of progress”), while PetroSA purchased oil concessions, and Global Engineering Consortium SA signed a R180 million contract with the Sudan Railway Corporation.

Politically, the players with the largest stake, when the two Sudans are taken as a piece, are the Chinese and the Americans. While the CPA was largely a result of consistent American pressure, the independence referendum in January 2011 could never have happened without the Chinese conceding to its inevitability. China has for years owned controlling stakes in Sudan’s big energy consortiums, and thus could expect roughly 60% of the 490,000 barrels of oil that flowed to Port Sudan through pipelines they had built and maintained.

The questions become more urgent by the day: how will South Sudan’s fledgling government manage the feeding frenzy? Whose sphere of influence will they enter? When will the oil start flowing? And will the people of this battered nation get a chance to reap the rewards of an independence that cost millions of lives and decades of darkness?

Meanwhile, on the flat screen at the head of the boardroom, Wolf Blitzer makes it clear that the numbers have all but sunk Romney’s campaign.

“Fuck it,” says Billy, standing. “I’m going to put in an order for a thousand rounds of ammo.”

The architecture, if you can call it that, is minutely descriptive. The Ministry of Petroleum is a mirrored gangster palace-cum-70s Baghdad nightclub, with tight security and a consigliore in a fine suit who barks, when we enter, “What is your agenda?” At the Ministry of Industry and Commerce we find no security and compact, welcoming buildings. The Ministry of Wildlife resembles a bombed-out park.

In office after office, while we wait for interviews that will never happen, we get reminders of the morning’s election. Obama’s victory speech – “you reaffirmed the spirit that has triumphed over War and Depression, the spirit that has lifted this country from the depths of despair to the great heights of hope” – has already been downloaded as a ringtone. In Juba, democracy is a powerful brand, but a bitch to implement.
If there is anyone here who properly understands this, who can pick at the myriad threads that bind and knot his country into an impenetrable tangle, it must be Lumumba Stanislaus-Kaw Di-Aping. Known to South African journalists as the man who once unofficially represented the SPLM in Pretoria, and to the world’s press as the diplomat who engineered a breakaway of African states at the 2009 Copenhagen Climate Conference (when he was chief negotiator for the so-called G77 bloc and China), Di-Aping is currently in charge of his country’s development vision.

His liberal-humanist bona fides are impressive – stints at Yale, at Oxford, at the United Nations and McKinsey & Co. Although he was the architect, with the assistance of George Soros, of the hundred million dollar Climate Green Fund, he drew the ire of the West for comparing its climate policy to the Holocaust, and for “ask[ing] Africa to sign a suicide pact, an incineration pact, in order to maintain the economic dominance of a few countries”. He faced down President Obama over the negotiating table, and did not blink.

As for his own homeland, Di-Aping is no less resolute. “There is no such thing as reconstruction in South Sudan,” he says. “We have only construction. We have no powerful vested interests that can impede a developmental state the way South Africa’s transformation plan was scattered. Ideologically, we have no power struggles within the movement, such as there are in the ANC.”

Performance-oriented leadership

We have met him at an outdoor café in downtown Juba, where it appears to us that the broader vested interests are on full display – NGO-types vying for tables with Chinese businessmen, local politicians whispering lest they be heard by American ears – but we take his point: compared to South Africa’s ruling party, the SPLM is a paragon of virtuous unity. Di-Aping’s contention is that neither the market fundamentalists nor the socialists within his party are strong enough to dictate policy, and that given the tabula rasa before him, what needs to be emulated are the blueprints of countries like Botswana and Mauritius.

He speaks of ordinary citizens taking precedence over the demands of big capital, of performance-oriented leadership, of an autonomous bureaucracy manipulated neither by the market nor by politics. For Di-Aping, the per capita prosperity of Botswana and Mauritius is important mainly in hindsight—what was critical when those African exemplars were coming up was how they managed to spread the wealth. “Luckily enough,” he says, “in South Sudan we own the oil resources. Now we need to orient that towards the vision.”

Hesitating for a moment, Di-Aping then opens his laptop, and invites us to have a look at a document. This, he explains, is the manifesto for South Sudanese development; we are among the first outsiders to see it.
Due to be endorsed in December 2012, he says, it will inform three things: all of South Sudan’s development processes, its entire project of state formation, and its constitutional framework going forward.

The writing in the 33-page document, which was overseen by a committee of seven, was done mostly by the man before us – in the context of the greed and misery we’ve already witnessed on Juba’s streets, it soon becomes apparent that we’ve been given access to a profoundly beautiful (if profoundly ambitious) growth plan.

Di-Aping scrolls through the pages until he arrives at a certain paragraph, which he asks us to read aloud: “The mission of the SPLM is to construct a knowledge economy in South Sudan and to build a nation and society that is inspired by peace, freedom, justice, unity, prosperity and progress. The SPLM will ensure democracy under the rule of law and good governance, to safeguard fundamental human, economic, social, cultural and religious rights and freedoms. Through the people, SPLM shall govern.”

The question is obvious: a knowledge economy in a country with one of the lowest literacy rates on Earth, where barely a quarter of the populace is able to read and write?

“The only way ahead for South Sudan is through a massive educational programme,” says Di-Aping. “This is the difference between where Africa went wrong and where the Asian tiger economies went right. You cannot think of creating opportunities when the majority of your people are illiterate, I don’t care whose theories you’ve read. Okay?”

According to Di-Aping, its late admittance as an independent state has given South Sudan the opportunity to learn from the developing world’s mistakes – and what it’s learned is that where education hasn’t been a priority, only suffering has been harvested. He rejects the assertion that his country lacks ‘capacity’, countering that whatever the term means, no nation in history ever started off with it. “What we need,” he says, “is the will and the wit.”

The developing world’s mistakes

It’s the country’s vast pool of youth, Di-Aping continues, that’s at the core of the manifesto. South Sudan’s thousands of young, returning exiles-the so-called Lost Boys, who in the ’80s and ’90s trekked on foot across the border, receiving their secondary education in refugee camps, gaining admittance to universities in the United States – have been earmarked to haul the rest of the nation up. It will be up to them to erect what the SPLM recognises as the Five Pillars: mass education; effective petroleum and mining management; sustainable agriculture and climate change policies; infrastructural development; financial and industrial growth.

Later, while we’re taking cover from a torrential downpour, Di-Aping stresses the urgency of getting this vision squared away. “We understand how the West plays the game – that’s old hat. As for the Chinese, the only way you manage them is after you have everything spelt out. Otherwise? Otherwise they’ll finish you.”

It’s a Saturday afternoon in Unity State, the oil-rich province on the border with Sudan, and James Adiok Mayik is once again quoting John Garang. Killed in a helicopter crash in 2005, South Sudan’s liberation icon is never far from the thoughts of the country’s intelligentsia. Adiok, recently returned from Portland, Oregon, more than fits the bill – armed with a Master of Education, he is exactly the caste of young leader of whom Di-Aping spoke. “Bring the town to the people,” he intones, as we lounge on the concrete roof of our bare-bones hotel, “not the people to the town.”

Like most of his ilk, Adiok’s Lost Boy history began when he was in his early teens, and his life is marked with violence and hardship. A firstborn Nuer herder who was never meant to enter a schoolhouse, he was forced to walk barefoot across the country, finding refuge in Kenya. Ironically, without the war, Adiok would not have learned to read and write. Now, he teaches teachers how to teach.

Garang’s quote, which Adiok repeats twice for effect, pumps through the veins of local thought-leaders – it implies a decentralised system of governance, where service delivery to the rural areas slows the pace of urbanisation that has all but destroyed many African states. Still, the pull of petroleum is irresistible, and Unity State illuminates the oppositional forces at work in South Sudan.

Bentiu, for instance. A town that swells by the day, thumping with the noise of generators for a few raucous hours after dusk. Standing at midnight in its starlit,
sewage-lined streets, in a preternatural quiet that speaks to the lack of basic 20th century amenities, we come to understand the scale of the country's challenges.

Fully demarcated

The governor of Unity State is an ex-warlord named Taban Deng Gai – according to a local civil rights activist who speaks to us on condition of anonymity, he's “not only the most corrupt man in South Sudan, but in all of Africa”. Deng, who has been absent from his state for almost three months, is currently paying a visit to his heavily fortified bush camp. With him, we have it on good authority, are his deputies, come to provide reports on the latest events.

He is unlikely to receive much good news. After Chevron found oil near Bentiu in 1981, Sudan's then president, Jafaar Nimieri – who in 1983 rekindled hostilities between the Muslim north and Christian/animist south by introducing Sharia law – tried to push the nominal border as far back as possible. Unity was thus rendered a permanent frontline, and in arming proxies and stoking inter- and intra-ethnic grievances, Khartoum froze the area in the Stone Age.

At its quietest, the state writhes with political and ethnic tension. In many regions, particularly in the restive north, where the border has yet to be fully demarcated, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) has scant authority, and roving rebel commanders have enormous sway. Characterising the war as a conflict between north and south becomes almost laughably reductive – Deng himself was variously aligned with Khartoum, the SPLA, and a range of splinter groups. The alliances, broken, renewed, or otherwise, resemble the plot of a particularly convoluted soap opera.

Partly in preparation for our trip to South Sudan, we met in October with China's Special Envoy to Africa, Ambassador Zhong Jianhua, at the Foreign Ministry in Beijing. The ambassador's brief has always focused (some might say to a disproportionate degree) on the Sudan issue; his predecessor, Liu Guijin, was instrumental in brokering talks with then Chinese premier Hu Jintao and Sudan's Omar al-Bashir, a dialogue that led directly to the independence referendum.

“Africa used to buy expensive and sell cheap,” Ambassador Zhong told us. “Now, they sell expensive and buy cheap.”

He was referring to the unprecedented opportunities that an oil price of US$100 a barrel presents to South Sudan, and his outlook reflects a key difference in how China and the West view the region. Seen through Beijing's lens, the country is in a far better position than China was after the Cultural Revolution, when commodity prices were at an historic low. Ambassador Zhong made it clear that, for him, South Sudan is a universe of potential. Whereas from Washington's perspective, the country is not much more than a basket case, a backwater in need of nursing and aid.

Ambassador Zhong assured us that negotiations were underway to turn the oil taps back on. By the time we arrive in Bentiu, his words have proved prescient: the pipelines are being flushed, and the lifeblood might flow as soon as December, or January, or some other point in the not-too-distant future.

Sell expensive and buy cheap

On the Sunday following our arrival Adiok arranges a 4x4, an armed guard, and an audience with the local security chief. We are allowed to proceed along the path of the buried pipeline, through swampy wastelands, to the refinery of the Greater Nile Petroleum Operating Company, 40% owned by the China National Petroleum Corporation.

A few kilometres beyond a bridge that al-Bashir's warplanes failed to bomb in April, the craters lying
muddy and deep by the side of the road, we stop for lunch. “This place used to be beautiful when the oil was flowing,” Adiok informs us – although amid the stench and the torpor, it’s hard to imagine how.

Forty minutes later, we’re inside an aluminium compound, in conversation with a local superintendent. We are led to a second compound, where the refinery’s Chinese production manager appears less than thrilled to see us. “But they are looking for Chinese investment in Africa,” says the superintendent. “That is you!”

Laughter all round. And then there are six men at the production manager’s door, two large members of the project’s security detail having just joined the fray. The production manager is thus rescued, allowed to return to his Sunday rest. We are led away and mildly interrogated. Who are we? What do we want? The large men, almost sympathetic to our story, in the end play it safe. Like everyone else in Unity State, they are pawns in a geopolitical game. The rules at this refinery are determined by Beijing, by Khartoum, and – still only last – by Juba.

That night, on a TV hanging in a boma in a Bentiu hotel, we watch news of the highway being built between South Sudan and Kenya, with help from China Exim Bank. A contingent arrives on November 15, to hasten negotiations. Adiok sighs.

“There you go,” he says.

Security detail

The feeding frenzy will continue, as will the struggle for South Sudan’s soul. Shortly before our arrival, the creation of the country’s new capital is announced: according to the Sudan Tribune, the Pan-China Construction Group will fund and build a glittering modern metropolis from the nothingness of Ramciel, which lies in the dead centre of the country.

There is an all too apt parable lurking in the news of Ramciel. As the nascent United States of America did with Washington DC, South Sudan will fashion a fresh government seat to echo its fresh democracy. Except that here, construction comes at the behest of the Chinese. Ideals versus pragmatics: the curse of the post-modern liberation movement.

What would John Garang, who wanted to bring the town to the people, say about Ramciel, about Bentiu, about Juba, about the 18 months following independence?

For his part, Adiok doesn’t equivocate. “The war smashed our way of life,” he says. “We need to heal. What good will come of people going to the city? What will they do there?”
ANGOLA’S CHINESE-BUILT RAIL LINK AND THE SCRAMBLE TO ACCESS THE REGION’S RESOURCES

By John Grobler

First published in The Africa Report in 2014

Swiss commodity giant Trafigura, partnering with the politically connected Angolan company Cochan Limited and the mysterious China International Fund, has quietly gained total control of Angola’s railway infrastructure, fuel distribution network and iron ore deposits via a vast global network of offshore companies registered in various tax havens.

Using funds generated by Angola’s oil sales to China, the consortium has built up a vast business empire known as the DT Group. It consists of property, fuel, steel-making, shipping and logistics holdings that could have profound economic and political implications for all of south-western Africa.

China had overtaken Portugal as Angola’s top source of both imports (68% of all Angola’s imports come from China) and exports (46% of all Angola’s exports go to China) by late 2012, largely due to a series of oil-for-infrastructure deals that started in 2003. A confluence of interests – private interests residing in public office – at the centre of the DT Group has taken advantage of this position to dominate the petroleum and mining commodity trade in Angola and the neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

With a rebuilt deepwater port on the Atlantic coast at Lobito, replete with a new bulk ore terminal, a nearby...
200,000 barrel-a-day oil refinery under construction and a new, Chinese-built railway system poised to enter the DRCs troubled Katanga province, questions are being asked about the intentions of Angola’s DT Group.

The strategic Caminho de Ferro de Benguela (CFB), the shortest rail line linking Congolese and Zambian mining interests to European markets, could prove to be a double-edged sword for the DRC. Katanga is now at risk of being caught between the devil and the deep blue sea – quite literally.

Once the 1,344 km Benguela line is connected to the rail system in Katanga, it could become a game-changer for the southern African mining industry. At the moment, all minerals are exported via Richard’s Bay in South Africa, some 8,000 km away by train or truck. Lobito’s brand new facilities are less than 2,000 km away – and the Angolans hope to be transporting 20 million tons over the new railway line by 2015.

**Game-changer: The 1,344 km Benguela rail line**

Apart from diamond mines in north-west Angola too remote to benefit from the CFB, there are no other functioning mines in Angola – so where will these 20 million tons of ore come from?

According to AidData.org, an NGO that tracks Chinese investment in Africa, the rebuilding of the CFB (and two other railway lines in Angola) is a ‘mixed investment’, meaning there are also private investors involved. Who they are is not known: China International Fund failed to respond to inquiries.

“The question we have is, just who will own this railway line?” asks a Likashi-based manager for a large mining services company. “Whoever controls that line will control Katanga’s mineral exports.” Like many sources interviewed in Katanga, the manager would only speak on the condition of anonymity.

Mutual distrust on either side of the border runs deep, especially since the recent resurgence of a 30-year-old secessionist ghost – the dream of an independent Katanga – has seen hundreds of civilians massacred since 2011 by a shadowy militia calling itself Kata Katanga (‘Chop off Katanga from DRC’).

Some 365,000 people, mostly from DRC President Joseph Kabila’s Balubakat ethnic group, have been displaced in northern Katanga over the past year by this shadowy force.

The violence wracking Katanga is a symptom of a larger but hidden struggle for control of the province’s mineral resources, which provided more than half of the world’s cobalt supplies last year as well as about 4% of all copper. It has enormously rich copper, gold, uranium, tin tungsten and ferrous minerals deposits.

The rebirth of the Lobito Corridor is viewed with mixed feelings by Katanga’s mining industry: while it would mean greater economic efficiency, it could also put them at the mercy of whoever controls the Angolan infrastructure.

Because fuel and transport average 50% of a mine’s operational costs, whoever could supply both fuel and bulk transport from Angola would also have significant price-making power over the Katanga mining industry – especially if the fuel and transportation suppliers are also the buyers of the mines’ production.

**Frontline: Luau**

If there’s a frontline in this secret war, it is on the Angolan border at Luau. Here, China Railway 20 Bureau Group Corporation (CR-20) – the company that reconstructed the Benguela Railway between 2006 and 2015 at a cost of US$1.83 billion, is now advancing, rail by rail, on the Katangan frontier post of Dilolo on the opposite bank of the Kasai River.
The contrasts between Luau and Dilolo could not be greater. Dilolo is a dirty, run-down smugglers’ paradise, replete with predatory and corrupt border police. Across the river, Luau is rising like a Chinese phoenix from the ashes of Angola’s civil war: a newly tarred main road, a glittering new railway station, all built by Chinese contract workers under a 2002 oil-for-infrastructure deal.

On an early Sunday morning in late 2013, a CR-20 locomotive rolled into the new railway station to deliver a team of Chinese workers, many dressed in military camouflage, to the construction site for a new international airport on the western outskirts of town.

The Chinese driver, face streaked with exhaustion from what he said was an all-day, all-night ride from Huambo, some 650 km to the west, squinted at two Angolan security guards wearing new uniforms emblazoned ‘China International Fund’ across the back. “This company, no good. Work all the time, Saturday, Sunday. Not good company,” he says.

A glimpse into the Hong Kong-based China International Fund (CIF) – also known as the 88 Queensway Group after their address – provides some clues into this battle unfolding in the new scramble for Africa’s mineral riches.

While there has been speculation that the CIF is Beijing’s official representative in Angola, Chinese diplomats have repeatedly distanced themselves from the company’s sharp-elbowed business practices.

CIF is the exclusive broker for all large Angolan infrastructure contracts. A US congressional report into CIF identified its president as Sam Pa, also known as Xu Jhiang, a former military officer believed to be close to senior leaders in the Chinese military leadership who had done military training with Angolan President Eduardo dos Santos in Soviet Russia. This likely occurred prior to 1979 when Dos Santos was attending a military academy where he studied petro-engineering.

Sam Pa has been accused of shady business in every troubled African country from Guinea to Madagascar, touting minerals-for-infrastructure deals, and appears to have been at least the main representative for DT Group in China for the first five years of the arrangement when all infrastructure deals were channelled via the CIF.

CIF’s Angolan partner, the DT Group, is owned by generals. Its Asian holding arm, DTS Holdings (Singapore), lists General Leopoldino ‘Dino’ de Nascimento as its sole director. De Nascimento is the former information chief under Angolan President Eduardo dos Santos and advisor to General Manuel Helder Veira ‘Kopelipa’ Dias.

De Nascimento recently announced his retirement from active politics to concentrate on his business interests, while Kopelipa Dias – a battle-hardened former Special Forces commander – is believed to harbour presidential ambitions.

DT Group’s Angolan shareholding is held via Cochon (Angola), a company created in 2009 by Dos Santos’s billionaire daughter, Isabel, according to the Angolan government gazette Diario. All three are closely associated with former Sonangol CEO and current Vice-President Manuel Vincente, widely touted to become the next Angolan president.

Corporate intelligence reports on CIF have painted it as a ‘general-to-general’ arrangement between the two military authorities. According to the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, the CIF is closely linked to the Chinese ministries of Foreign Affairs, Public Security and State Security.

A Chinese train driver attached to the CR-20 workgroup has a brief breakfast after driving through the night to deliver a work team to the remote border town of Luau, eastern Moxico province.

Workers attached to CR-20 work on reinforcements on the CFB line outside Huambo, Angola.
Research by Angola-China specialist Lucy Corkin showed that the CIF had become the sole conduit for all China-Angola joint ventures post-2004, using Chinese state-sponsored lines of credit to finance Angola’s ambitious reconstruction programme, and repaid with a daily uplift of 100,000 barrels of Angolan oil. All of this was being run through Trafigura’s – now headquartered in Singapore – extensive network of dealers.

Although China’s state-owned Sinopec oil company initially was to partner with Angola’s state-owned oil company Sonangol in the construction of a new refinery outside Lobito, this role appeared to have been assigned to interests aligned to the Trafigura-CIF-DT Group, with construction currently being undertaken by Brazil’s Odebrecht conglomerate.

The offshore daisy chain

Trafigura and DT Group, via a series of ‘Chinese Box’ front companies set up in Angola, the Bahamas and Singapore since 2009, now control one of the largest oil swap arrangements in the world by which most of Angola’s estimated US$20 billion per annum oil exports to China are sourced.

Trafigura’s annual profits have increased 250% to US$1 billion since entering into this partnership in 2009. It is, however, just the most visible face of a financial-political-military juggernaut perhaps best described as an ultra-multinational company that blends public and private interests into massive profits for a small group of autocrats and their billionaire families and friends.

Through their Puma Energy Holdings, registered in the British Virgin Islands, this syndicate is now also the dominant mid- and down-stream fuel distribution company in sub-Saharan Africa, with a network of 320 outlets across seven countries that spans the girth of Africa from Angola to Tanzania.

The DT Group-Trafigura relationship is no secret. Berne Declaration, a Swiss NGO that promotes socially and ecologically responsible behaviour by Swiss companies and financial interests, published a critical seven-page investigation of Trafigura in 2013. Trafigura acknowledges the relationship on its website, but its secret control of all of Angola’s railway infrastructure was not previously known.

According to Trafigura’s website, the project includes “plant processing, logistics and port facilities”, and the local railway network concession is “being handed over” to the mining company, Angola Exploration Mining Resources. The railway piece of the project will be managed by Vecturis, which has “extensive experience” in Africa’s railway industry, and which has formed a joint venture with DT in Angola, the website says.

DT’s ambitions are made clear through this entry on its website: “The Singapore registered joint venture between Cochran Group and Trafigura provides logistic and trading services, in Angola and surrounding countries.”

Angola’s government gazette shows that DT Group owns 99.9% of Vecturis (Angola), with 0.1% allocated to DTS Servicos, the DT Group’s services arm.

DTS Servicos’ shareholders in turn hold extensive mining, property and energy interests in the DRC via ESCOM, the commercial trading arm of Portuguese Banco Espirito Santo, in which Isabel dos Santos holds a 19% interest, records show.

Trafigura does not search for oil – the so-called upstream sector – but its profits lie in its diversified portfolio, of which iron ore makes up a considerable part. The company, being privately owned, is not obliged to disclose its trades, but Trafigura has been aggressively pursuing off-take agreements with any potential iron ore producer since 2009, according to the owners of one such prospect who were approached by Trafigura’s dealers.

Gatekeeper of the mines

Meanwhile, DT Group has taken over Ferrangol, the state-owned iron ore mining company and all of its concessions in Angola via a joint venture called Angola
Exploration Resource Mining. This effectively makes it the final gatekeeper for any mining ventures in Angola by control over the entire logistics chain.

Vecturis was also a major player in the restructuring of the Société des Chemin de Fer du Congo (SNCC), with the World Bank pumping US$374 million into restoring the utterly rundown and over-staffed state-owned company.

The responsible official at the World Bank, Jean-Charles Crochet, said most of this was to upgrade the busiest section from Kolwezi to the Zambian border, as well as acquire 20 new locomotives and 800 wagons.

Restoring the remaining 600 km from Kolwezi would require a public-private partnership – something Vecturis was already successfully doing in Madagascar and Colombia, according to its website. In both cases, Vecturis contracts are closely associated with huge mining projects: iron in Madagascar and coking coal in Colombia, destined for the resource-hungry Chinese ‘special export zones’.

Most of the US$255 million World Bank grant disbursed in April 2011 was used to fix the SNCC’s most immediate problems, including paying off about 35% of a bloated workforce of some 12,000 people, Crochet explained. But the workers – from shunters to mid-level managers – have uniformly complained about not being paid, and accuse senior management of misappropriating funds for their own pet projects.

Light at the end of the tunnel?

There appears to be no great urgency from the DRC side to rebuild the line to the Angolan border. The bimonthly train from Lubumbashi to Dilolo can take up to three weeks per trip because of frequent derailings.

The ore trains to Zambia’s refineries and South Africa’s harbours, in contrast, are noticeably busier than previous years, thanks to nine locomotives SNCC rents from Cheltam, a subsidiary of South Africa-based Grindrod Shipping Lines.

So, who will finance and rebuild this last, critical 600 km of rail? That role appears to have fallen to the Chinese, whose 2008 offer of US$8 billion worth of infrastructure for 10 years’ worth of tax-free mining attracted wide condemnation from such quarters as the World Bank.

Although this was reduced to US$6 billion and on more equitable terms, the Kolwezi-Dilolo track seemed an obvious investment target, especially now that China is increasingly making its presence felt in this ultra-competitive sector.

The Angolans, however, appear to have the biggest plans for Katanga. Apart from the new Luau International Airport, the government is also constructing a massive inland container depot, matching a similar one in Lobito, and a series of bonded warehouses in a town of only about 12,000 people, local officials said.

The scope of these plans is evidenced by the rails that the CR-20 team is laying en route to Luau: the new Benguela line runs on the most heavy-duty rail available, which is typically used for carrying ore wagons weighing 400 tons.

According to Angolan anti-corruption campaigner Rafael Marquez, the CPB project, while ostensibly a national one, has private objectives. It follows a persistent pattern he has come to recognise after years of investigating corruption among the Angolan elite, he says.

“All that operation in Luau is tied to [Angolan] military ambitions for the control of Congolese resources for the profit of the Angolan ruling elite, and their foreign business associates,” he charged.

Considering that Angola does not have a single mine within 600 km of Luau, it would appear that the fight for Katanga is only about to begin.
The knocked-knee driver of the Boda Boda motorcycle whistled as he rode. I was sure he heard my question because he changed to a low tone and answered over his shoulder. "Of course we have already started benefiting from the resumption of Kilembe copper mines. We transport people from Kasese town to the mines. And when the mines start operating we shall get more passengers. We are happy we shall get more money."

In their heyday, the Kilembe mines were the lifeblood of the Kasese district in south-western Uganda, and accounted for a large part of the 30% that the mining sector contributed to total export earnings. However, production of copper and cobalt ore at the mines stopped in 1982 and the mines were abandoned due to political turmoil in neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and a fall in copper prices.

A Chinese consortium recently won a concession to revive the mine, however, and clearly the locals are hopeful that this could once again mean prosperity for the area.

Kilembe mines today
The abandoned and ghost-city-like Kilembe copper mines are nestled in the foothills of the Rwenzori Mountains, about 368 km south of Kampala. The old but unique colonial-style buildings constructed with wood still lie barely unchanged over the course of three decades, although several were destroyed by last year’s massive flooding in the area.

As we cross a narrow bridge over the Nyamwamba river a pebbled road leads uphill to an area described as ‘45 portal’, where the lower mines are located. A steel tower used for crushing the copper ore stones hangs loosely above a large heap of stones. Four large tanks that were used to treat liquid waste from the mines sit
still atop the lower mines. A rail of cable cars that carried miners in and out of the mines is stuck in one place.

With dozens of houses at the mines, Kilembe estate covers an area about 8.5 km long on the banks of the Nyamwamba River and Nyalusegi Stream. Life is relatively slow and it is not until you get to Kilembe Hospital, owned and run by Kilembe Mines Limited, that we are drawn out of the gloom that comes with visiting the abandoned mines.

The main fuel station and post office are non-functional. Only a few shops remain in the once-thriving town that seems to have been frozen in time; apart from encroaching decay, nothing has changed in decades.

**Chinese consortium takes over**

But Kilembe looks set for change. Tibet Hima Industry Company Limited, a consortium of Chinese companies, is reviving copper mining in Kilembe after signing a concession agreement with the government of Uganda in 2013.

The firm is to invest US$175 million in the mines in the first three years, which will go to resuscitating smelting, refining and product factory development. It also plans to increase power production at the Maluku power plant, one of Kilembe’s assets, from 5MW to 12MW.

According to the Ugandan government, Kilembe had 4.17 million tons of copper reserves when it ceased production in 1982. In addition to the unexploited copper ore, there are 5.5 million tons of cobalt in tailings (dumped mining material). The government also says there are additional copper reserves in the vicinity of the mine.

Lu Guo, the deputy chief executive of Tibet Hima, told journalists in Kampala at the announcement of the investment that they paid the Ugandan government a signature fee of more than US$4 million and shall pay an annual concession fee of US$1.5 million for 25 years – the duration of the concession.

**Thousands of jobs to be created**

As a direct result of this investment, Lee Quinaguo, the company’s general manager, says the mines would offer more than 3,500 direct jobs after the exploration process.

“Currently we are doing the rehabilitation and exploration process and after that, we shall start the mining and processing,” Lee says.
Memories of the old mines

In the 1970s copper from Kilembe was one of Uganda’s leading foreign exchange earners and production provided employment to over 6,000 workers, according to Kwatampora who has lived in Kilembe for the last 40 years.

For about 12 years, until 2002, Amos George Mfitebasaze was the general manager of Kilembe Mines Limited (KML), a public company that was 99% owned by the government of Uganda and 1% by the Kingdom of Tooro. KML maintained the mines from 1975 until Tibet Hima was given the concession to run the mines.

“Even after stopping production, in 1990 the mines employed 1,200 people. By 2000 we had 600 employees,” says Mfitebasaze.

Buhikire Bwakatahwire, a social worker, lived at the mines in the mid-1960s. He was then a secondary school student staying with his uncle who worked in the mines. Bwakatahwire says that during the 1960s people employed in the mines lived better lives.

“They had at least enough money to take their children to school, build better houses back at home, and their children are right now living good lives.”

“Several Bakiga (a Ugandan tribe) migrated from Kabale district to work in the mines. They were able to get money and educate their children. This is why Bakiga people are among the mostly highly educated Ugandans now,” Bwakatahwire says.

Bwakatahwire also cites the extension of the railway line to Kasese to transport copper to Jinja for smelting, and the introduction of cotton as a cash crop as some of the benefits the mines brought to Kasese.

“If the old mines were able to bring all these developments to the region, then expect the new ones to more than triple them,” insists Buhikire.

Kasese to benefit too

The revival of the mines will bring several other benefits, not just employment.

The company plans to increase power production at the Mobuku power plant from 5MW to 12MW, increasing power supply to the communities living close to the mines. The company will also pay royalties and other taxes as stipulated by the government in the concession agreement.

“We have started benefiting indirectly because the hotels where they (consultants and exploration experts) are residing in Kasese town pay local service taxes and when full production starts we shall also get royalties from them,” says Lieutenant Colonel Dura Muhindo Mawa, the Kasese district chairperson.

Guo says Tibet Hima is also considering taking over the management of Kasese Cobalt Company Limited (KCCL), which closed last year as a result of lack of raw materials. “You can’t run a cobalt plant when you don’t have raw materials. Now that we have the raw materials we are going to consider buying KCCL so that we can process our cobalt from that plant.” Cobalt is extracted from the sludge left after copper is extracted from the raw ore.

Pollution fears

However, there are fears that reviving the mines will cause pollution. Asiimwe Wilson, a Kasese-based journalist, says he has covered stories of pollution from the mines and fears that their revival could mean increased pollution in the area.

But Augustine Koli, the Kasese district environment officer, says there should be no cause for worry. “We are working closely with the new company in the exploration process to ensure that what is taking place is environmentally friendly,” says Koli.
CHINESE COMPANIES GOING FOR GOLD IN ZAMBIA

By Hu Jianlong

First published in Chinese in Southern Weekly in December 2013

HU JIANLONG is an investigative journalist with Southern Weekly, one of the most outspoken publications in China with a circulation of over 1.6 million. Hu has also worked for Caijing Magazine, well-known for its muckraking reporting, where he focused on social and environmental conflicts and disclosing corruption of top CPC officials. He has a Master's degree in Public Administration from Wuhan University and has worked as a professional reporter for more than seven years. Hu participated in the 2013 Wits China-Africa Reporting Project tour to Africa where he conducted an investigation into Chinese investments in Zambia and also wrote about how Chinese NGOs are entering Africa.

It’s the end of October 2013, and a few bored Tonga youths are playing pool in a thatched hut in a nature reserve in southern Zambia; the cue ball is damaged, a third of the balls is missing. The ferry crossing on the bank of the Kafue River does not have any distinguishing geographic features. The closest town, Choma, is more than 100 km away; Zambia’s capital, Lusaka, is almost 500 km away.

As Wang Hanqing and two of his colleagues get out of their SUV, they immediately attract the gaze of all the Tonga locals. Even though it’s in a nature reserve, this place is far off any tourist routes. The Tongas stare at these new arrivals inquisitively – the Chinese have arrived in their domain.

Wang Hanqing is assistant general manager of China Electric Power Construction Group Co. Ltd’s 11th Bureau in Lusaka, his two colleagues work at a subsidiary in Henan province. They intend to construct a power transmission line from Itezhi-Tezhi to the Kafue River bank. For the Tonga people making a living on the grassland, power cuts are just like thunderstorms in the rainy season: they could strike at any moment.

According to data from the World Bank, three-quarters of households in sub-Saharan Africa, around 500 million people, have never used electricity. Providing electricity is a fundamental problem for African countries. Electricity cuts cost Africa around US$38 billion every year. The electricity shortfall in Zambia is currently as much as 200 MW. In the northern Copperbelt province with its advanced industry, however, electricity is more stable.

“A regular power supply can be guaranteed, this is our selling point when attracting foreign investment,” says engineer Zhao Jinsheng of the China Nonferrous Metal Mining Group’s Zambia-China Economic & Trade Cooperation Zone.

The meeting of China’s surplus hydropower construction teams and power-hungry developing countries is fortuitous. When discussing his participation in the construction of hydroelectric power stations, the 11th Bureau engineer Liu Yuanguang can hardly conceal his pride: “Mongolia and Belize, before coming to Zambia I worked in these two countries. You need to use a magnifying glass to find the small Central American island of Belize, with a population of 320,000, on a map.”
“All our competitors are Chinese”

Zambia is a new world for Chinese energy construction enterprises going global. On the African continent, only 8% of hydropower resources have been developed, and Zambia contains over 40% of southern Africa’s water resources.

In fact, Chinese hydropower engineering companies have no alternative but to set their sights on underdeveloped countries.

“In China, the big rivers and lakes have already been more or less developed, and what’s more, competition is fierce. You have to choose between undertaking projects operating at a loss, or to opt for other capital construction projects like thermal power plants and road infrastructure,” says one hydropower expert who did not wish to be named. Developed countries such as the US and France have likewise long since extensively developed their water resources, and “now they’re removing dams, not building them.”

If you take China Electric Power’s 11th Bureau as an example, overseas projects account for more than half of total profits. But even overseas the good days have long passed.

“In the 1990s, a project’s gross profit could reach 30%, but now it’s spread very thin,” says an employee of a China Electric Power subsidiary in Shandong province.

In September 2011, the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission (SASAC) of the State Council of the Chinese government established China Electric Power and Sinohydro. In the town of Maamba in Zambia’s Southern province, Shandong Power Construction Company (SPCC) is constructing the Maamba thermal power plant in a mountain cavity. This is Zambia’s first thermal power plant, and it is owned by an Indian company. The two sides work very well together and have already agreed that SPCC will construct another power plant in Sinazongwe district. However, the appearance of another Chinese company has caused the relationship to shift again.

According to Wang Jie, assistant general manager of the SPCC Maamba project, “In the past, if there were ten companies bidding for a project, two would be Chinese. But now at least half are Chinese, and the competition is growing fiercer by the day”.

“If it threatens the crocodiles, you have to stop the work”

The road from the town of Maamba to Choma, the capital of Zambia’s Southern province, is an asphalt strip of two lanes. The neighboring countries of Zimbabwe, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Namibia have experienced violent political upheavals and conflicts, but Zambians are known for their moderate disposition, and China has been an ‘all-weather friend’ of the Zambian people.

So it was strange then that driving on the asphalt road going into Sinazongwe district, when passing a truck the Southern Weekly correspondent saw some passengers wave their hands in greeting, while others clenched their fists. After a journey of about 40 minutes, we passed a rusted road sign reading ‘Collum Coal Mine’, and it was only then that we could understand the hostility evident in the shaking fists.

On 15 October 2010, workers at Collum Coal Mine protested against poor working conditions. During the demonstration, two Chinese supervisors opened fire on the protestors and wounded 12 people. On 4 August 2012, another disturbance broke out at the mine, and a Chinese supervisor was killed when workers threw him into an underground pit.

Brigitte Read, project coordinator of the Wits China-Africa Reporting Project at the University of the Witwatersrand, explains that although the mine was privately owned by two Chinese brothers, the two incidents at the Collum mine really shocked many people in Africa and was interpreted by western media as one of the most negative aspects of Chinese investment in Africa.

When the Zambian government revoked the Collum mine’s mining concession in February 2013, it was Yamfwa Mukanga, the Minister for Tourism, Environment, and Natural Resources, who announced the decision as representative of the government. On 11 November, he explained to the Southern Weekly correspondent that, “Following an evaluation by an investigating committee, it was found that safety and environmental standards at the Collum mine were seriously problematic.”

The unemployment rate in Zambia is 50%, and more than 70% of the population live below the poverty line, but

“IN THE PAST, IF THERE WERE TEN COMPANIES BIDDING FOR A PROJECT, TWO WOULD BE CHINESE. BUT NOW AT LEAST HALF ARE CHINESE, AND THE COMPETITION IS GROWING FIERCER BY THE DAY”. 
the country’s comprehensive environmental protection legislation and strict enforcement really surprised the first Chinese to arrive. Zambia’s Environmental Protection and Pollution Control Act stipulates that not only should engineering projects undertake an environmental impact assessment, but the government should also conduct environmental impact assessments, and parliament can “identify projects or types of projects, plans and policies for which environmental impact assessment are required.”

On 6 September 2011, work commenced on the Itezhi-Tezhi hydroelectric power project. Before construction actually began, a whole year was spent on the environmental impact assessment,

“You had to answer all kinds of questions,” says project manager Li Tingwei. This was in stark contrast with his previous experience in China. “In engineering management classes, when we were discussing the two chapters on safety management and environmental protection, the teacher would always say, there’s nothing to discuss, just skip ahead.”

The Itezhi-Tezhi plant is situated in a nature reserve in southern Zambia, and there are crocodiles lurking in the Kafue River there. “On the day when we were using explosives in the mountain, workers from the nature reserve immediately came over and told us to cease, saying that they were first going to check on the crocodiles. If they are in any danger, we would have to stop the work.”

So the blasting ceased immediately, and the Chinese assisted the nature reserve to locate the crocodiles. After finding four crocodiles in the river near the work site, the staff of the nature reserve allowed the blasting to continue.

**Can’t afford to offend the trade unions**

In the two weeks from the end of October to early November 2013, almost all of Zambia’s newspapers were filled with the same headline: Would Konkola Copper Mines Plc (KCM) resist the government to the bitter end?

KCM is the third-largest copper producer in Zambia, but at the end of December the company suddenly announced that they were sacking 1,500 employees. Shortly afterwards, then-President Michael Sata stated that if KCM sacked a single worker, their mining concession would be revoked forthwith.

According to Zan Baosen, general manager of the Zambia-China Economic & Trade Cooperation Zone, “Sata’s campaign slogan that year was to strike at corruption, and put more money in the pockets of more people.” In the area of industrial relations, Sata took an extremely tough line, making it a complicated and perplexing issue for Chinese companies investing in Zambia.

On 3 November 2013, Chen Zhimin saw a copy of the first draft of the mining union’s 2014 judgements on labour issues. Chen is assistant manager at the China Non-Ferrous Metal Mining Corporation’s (CNMC) Non-Ferrous China-Africa mining company (NFCA), responsible for managing labour relations. “The union made new demands, they wanted to revise leave regulations.” The worst was yet to come: “They demanded a pay rise virtually every year.” One year the compensation for all workers was increased by as much as 15%. Yet unlike in previous years, this year copper prices remained depressed, and NFCA made a loss in the first half of the year.

At NCFA, the basic pay of miners has already surpassed US$1,000 per month, not including various subsidies. However, average pay for salaried workers in Zambia is around US$200 per month, and then, of course, there are the numerous unemployed.

The powerful unions are a partner that Chinese companies dare not antagonise. Several strikes have occurred at Chambishi Copper Smelter Co., Ltd. (CCS), but according to assistant general manager Zuo Yuntan, management has already learned a lot.

“For example, we’ve established an office for the workers here, and we are in communication with them whether there are issues at hand or not.”

Many Zambian workers who lack professional skills find the prospect of working at a Chinese company very attractive. Lubinda’s home is in the tourist city of Livingstone. He started working at the Kafue hydroelectric power plant in April 2011. Two years later, he has become a skilled electrician.

“The greatest value I’ve obtained since coming here isn’t the wages I’ve earned, but the technical skills I’ve gained. This means that I am guaranteed to find a job anywhere in Zambia.”
As far as Zambians are concerned, industrial relations are aimed at guaranteeing a safe work environment. Qiaona used to work in the shafts of the Collum mine. Qiaona complained to this reporter that in Maamba “there were no safety helmets, no boots, and no safety equipment at all.”

**Chinese workers in prison?**

The problems Chinese companies face in Zambia on the surface appears to be based on legal issues or industrial relations, but there are actually other factors at work on a deeper level.

In August 2010, Deborah Brautigam wrote a post on her blog entitled “Are the Chinese exporting prisoners abroad?” Brautigam, a professor at the Johns Hopkins University in the US, specialises in Sino-African relations and is best known for her book The Dragon’s Gift. As an authority in this field, she has meticulously researched the sequence of developments related to the story of Chinese exporting prisoners abroad.

Indian media first published this story, claiming that the Chinese government was sending convicted prisoners to serve their sentences in Sri Lanka and parts of Africa. After the story arrived in Zambia, it was taken up by the then leader of the opposition, Michael Sata, and the story then became that 80,000 Chinese convicts had been released to work in Zambia.

“That was just a strategy employed at the time by the opposition party,” explains Chinese Ambassador in Zambia, Zhou Yuxiao. During the election, Sata let it be known that as soon as he is elected, he would recognise Taiwan and order all mainland Chinese to leave Zambia forthwith.

The belief that Chinese workers are paroled convicts accords with Zambians’ psychological appraisal of the Chinese they see. According to Brautigam, “Chinese workers often reside in extremely basic accommodation, and security guards stand at the entrances. However, the objective with the guards is to prevent building materials from being stolen, not to keep watch on the Chinese workers”.

What Zambians find very hard to understand is how the Chinese workers are able to work virtually the whole year round without weekends, separated from their families, and the light is always on at the work site until late in the night. To Zambians such a life is no different from being in prison.

In 2008 when the global financial crisis erupted, Luanshya Copper Company, situated in Zambia’s Copperbelt province, was forced into bankruptcy. China Non-Ferrous Metal Mining Corporation (CNMC) shortly afterwards took over the company that was founded during the British colonial period. In the office of Li Yunsheng, Chinese Communist Party Secretary of CNMC Luanshya Copper Company, aside from the Asian sitting behind the desk, the ornamentation in the room has not been altered one jot. It’s as if the British just left yesterday.

“Zambians really like sport,” Li says. So after taking charge of the former British mine, CNMC also took over the 18 sports clubs operating under the same name. CNMC’s diligent localisation efforts also extended to the local employees’ use of the facilities.

After serving the British for over ten years, Luanshya resident Kamanja was employed as assistant general manager at CNMC Luanshva Copper Company.

“To be honest,” he says frankly, “before I decided to work at CNMC, there were many negative reports about the Chinese in the newspapers, and I was also very concerned. After joining CNMC, however, I feel that despite differences in the style of management, the Chinese way is by no means worse than that of the British.”

Yet the Chinese are still paying a price for communication issues. On the afternoon of 4 August 2012, when striking Collum mine workers threw the Chinese manager into a well, it seems the tragedy could have been avoided. As someone with inside knowledge of the matter states, “This is because in the morning they had already agreed to the workers’ demand for a pay rise, it’s just that the two sides were not able to communicate promptly, and the English ability of the Chinese on the scene was lacking.”

ASIDE FROM THE ASIAN SITTING BEHIND THE DESK, THE ORNAMENTATION IN THE ROOM HAS NOT BEEN ALTERED ONE JOT. IT’S AS IF THE BRITISH JUST LEFT YESTERDAY.
SECTION 2

LEARNING AND ADAPTING
ON THE TRAIL OF CHINA’S DRAGON HEAD COMPANIES IN EAST AFRICA

By Bob Wekesa

First published in Business Daily in August 2013

BOB WEKESA completed his PhD in 2015 at the Communication University of China in Beijing and holds a Master’s degree from the same institution. He was a research associate at the Wits China Africa Reporting Project from 2012 to 2014, and will in August 2015 commence a postdoctoral fellowship at the Wits Journalism department. After graduating from the University of Nairobi in 1998, he worked in the Kenyan press, rising to the positions of managing editor at Diplomat East Africa magazine and editorial director of Kenya Today, a government newspaper. He also had a stint as a Reuters Africa Journal stringer and was awarded a Commonwealth Press Union fellowship in 2002. This story on China’s commercial interests in East Africa involved extensive interviews with diplomats, corporate executives, managers of aid projects and scholars in China, Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda.

Chinese ‘dragon heads’ are the state-owned multinationals considered role models of China’s outbound trajectory. Most of these companies emerged after 1979 when the Chinese party-state embarked on sweeping reforms marked by commercialisation of productive functions of government ministries. However, some private Chinese enterprises have earned their place in the grand ‘dragon heads’ category precisely because they are seen as flying the Chinese five-star red flag internationally.

At the outset, it is worth pointing out that the presence of Chinese companies in East Africa is too extensive, multi-layered and intricate to be covered comprehensively in one fell swoop. With over 1,000 companies engaged in fields as diverse as mining, infrastructure, telecommunication, hospitality and manufacturing, any attempt at providing a holistic picture is over-ambitious and the best attempts can only offer snippets of understanding.

Historical links

It may be true that China-East Africa links have grown exponentially since 2000. However, the Chinese Silk Road to East Africa is today a matter of rising magnitude rather than being entirely new. Even without factoring in ancient links dating back 600 years, evidence abounds showing that the Chinese have been active in the East African economic sphere for more than 50 years.

The 1,800 km Tanzania-Zambia Railway (Tazara) is well-known as a trailblazer, not just in East Africa but as a poster child of historical Sino-African links, with construction commencing in 1967 and ending in 1975. Following a lead from the Tanzanian Ambassador to China, Philip Marmo (recently transferred to Germany), in the harbour city of Tianjin this writer met elderly Chinese engineers who worked on the Tazara project. They all speak flawless Swahili with a sophisticated Tanzanian turn of phrase, evidence if any was needed that the ties are historical.

But the Tazara has perhaps been over-studied. Li Jianbo, the country manager of China Road and Bridge Company in Rwanda is a quintessential illustration of the less known side of China-East Africa links.
"I was hardly out of my teens when I first arrived in Kigali in 1972," he reminisces. "Even during the genocide (between April and July 1994) we remained here and we were not targeted at all." Li is also the chairman of the Chinese business community in Rwanda. He adds that the only moment of heightened tension during the genocide was when Chinese employees had to be evacuated from the Gitarama and Kibuye road project sites which were under construction at the time.

"As soon as the conflict was over, we went back to the construction work and even World Bank officials who funded the project were amazed by our courage," Li recollects, an architectural map of a new road project linking north western parts of Rwanda to the south spread across his desk. A testament to the longevity of China Road and Bridge Company in Rwanda is writ large over the ageing red bricked compound in the upmarket Kiyovu suburbs of Kigali where Li has been based for 41 years. In his office, pictures of road projects dating back to the 1970s adorn the walls, a phenomenon visible in other projects by Chinese entities throughout the East African Community (EAC) region.

Providing insights into how China Road and Bridge Company has come to dominate road contracting works in Kigali specifically and Rwanda generally, then outgoing Ambassador of China to Kigali, Shu Zhan, attributes this to the longevity of the company in Rwanda.

"They constructed the Kigali-Ruhengeri road way back in the 1970s and I think they have gained valuable experience since then," he says, pointing out two multi-multimillion dollar Chinese-financed infrastructure projects in 2009 and 2011 as an indication of China's continued relations with Rwanda in the infrastructure sector.

In response to a question about any other illustration of long standing Chinese engagements in Tanzania over and above Tazara, Ouyang Daobing, a counsellor at the Chinese Embassy in Tanzania, referred this writer to Andrew Huang, a Chinese national who has been in Tanzania since the 1980s.

"I am a living example of Chinese who have seen Tanzania grow over the years partly with the support of Chinese investments," Huang says, taking time out in the interview to oversee the fixing of a closed-circuit television in his tastefully furnished home-cum-office in the Mikocheni suburbs of Dar es Salaam.

"Of course there are administrative challenges when working with our Tanzanian friends, as well as some Chinese nationals, who arrive here without proper papers or with criminal intentions and therefore spoil the reputation of the majority of honest Chinese nationals," says Huang, whose portfolio of roles includes serving as leader of the Tanzanian Overseas Chinese Association.

**Multilayered entities**

Even for seasoned East African corporate analysts, China's huge multinationals are a maze not readily decipherable. Part of the reason for this is that most of the large Chinese state-owned enterprises have many subsidiaries, holding companies and partnerships handling mind-boggling business lines at home and abroad.

The fact of the bewilderment for the average East African about Chinese companies came to light in the most dramatic of circumstances in the case of the bidding for the Karuma hydro-electric power dam in Uganda. When I sought out Ma Li, Deputy Director of China International Water and Electric Corporation in Beijing in late 2012, he was still grappling with the fact that a tender awarded to his company was causing so much controversy in the Ugandan parliament and was the subject of multiple investigations.

"Our company is associated with the Three Gorges Dam Corporation (the company that constructed the world's largest hydro-electric power plant of the same name on the Yangtze River). However some of our competitors (including Chinese companies) who lost the tender would like to cast our company as incapable of undertaking the US$1.6 billion project", Ma elucidates, citing the 6000 GWh annual output Merowe Dam project on the Nile in Sudan as a signature project of his company in Africa. Ultimately, Ma's company lost the project in July to Sinohydro, the same company that has also been involved in road infrastructure in Kenya such as the Thika Superhighway. A deal to streamline the knotted project seems to have been struck by Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping during the March 2013 Durban BRICS summit.

Shedding light on the complexities of Chinese companies, Du Fei, Vice President of China Road and Bridge Company in charge of Africa, explains that the company is a subsidiary of China Communications Construction Company which was established in 1979 as an offshoot of the Foreign Aid Office of the Ministry of Communications.

"The confusion about Chinese companies arises out of the fact that state-owned conglomerates often bid for projects using their parent or subsidiaries as circumstances dictate. For instance, while China Road
and Bridge Company won contracts for the eastern and northern Nairobi ring roads (bypasses) and the Nairobi-Mombasa trunk road projects, it is the parent company (China Communications Construction Company) that recently structured the deal for the construction of the 51 km (US$350 million) Entebbe-Kampala highway," Du explains at his office in downtown Beijing as he fishes out certificates showing accolades the company has been feted with in and out of China. Knowing this writer is Kenyan, Du points out that “our company is not new in Kenya as some would like to suggest. We established our office in Nairobi in 1984 and in fact, in Kenya the Mtito Andei-Voi road (World-Bank funded) which we completed in 1998, was at the time one of the best quality roads in Africa,” he gushes.

In addition to the multiplicity of subsidiaries and affiliates, large Chinese companies also have the capacity to undertake a wide variety of business lines. For instance, China Sheng Li Engineering Construction Group is active in the Nairobi urban infrastructure sector but has a longer track record in hydrocarbon extraction and chemical engineering fields.

Indeed, one of the companies that built the Tanzania-Zambia railway project, China Railways Construction Company, has mutated over the years, amalgamating entities formerly associated with the Chinese foreign aid department of Ministry of Railways and the People’s Liberation Army’s railway engineering brigade. Today, the company has well over 30 subsidiaries, some of them still active in the rehabilitation of the Tazara project, which has been dogged by financial and managerial challenges since its 1975 completion. Yet, in the specific case of the Tanzania-Zambia Railway, China Railways Construction Company is partnering with the Fortune Global 500 Rankings-listed China Railways Engineering Construction Engineering Company, a completely different entity, as well as the Designing Institute of the Ministry of Railways.

“The different companies and organisations play different roles and while it may look complex for our Tanzanian brothers, we actually work smoothly,” Xue Sanping, a project co-ordinator tells this writer at the dilapidated headquarters of the Tazara in Dar es Salaam. By contrast the Tanzanian and Zambian end of the bargain is not as smooth, as the joint management has lurched from one altercation to another over the years. As of mid-2012, a feasibility study was underway to concession the historically symbolic project to a Chinese company.

In the case of the China National Aero-Technology International Engineering Company (CATIC) the series of subsidiaries reaches dizzying proportions. “The parent CATIC entity was established in 1980 and has over the years grown to encompass real estate, hotels, engineering works, supply of construction and other equipment, civilian and military aviation supplies.” Wang Qixing, the Vice President of one of the CATIC subsidiaries ticks off the various fields in a wing of the CATIC Plaza sitting side by side with a five-star hotel owned by CATIC and overlooking the famous Bird’s Nest stadium in Beijing. “I am the vice president of Aviation Industry Corporation (AVIC) International Project Engineering Company and this should not be confused with CATIC, which is our parent company”, he explains.

“I believe many people in Kenya know more about our construction works on the second phase of Jomo Kenyatta International Airport in Nairobi for a new terminal and a 1,500-car three storey car park. We have done a lot of other projects including supply of equipment and training for the National Youth Service in Kenya”, he says.

“Often, our company seeks projects for which governments need solutions and structures innovative plans either directly funded or requiring long-term loans from Chinese financial institutions of our own investments.”

Policy banks

It has been pointed out time and again that the success of Chinese companies in securing infrastructure projects rests on their capacity to marshal resources from Chinese policy banks, particularly China Export Import Bank (Exim Bank) and China Development Bank. Indeed, the China Africa Development Fund, a subsidiary of China Development Bank, was established in 2006 for the express purpose of financing African projects. In 2012, the China Africa Development Fund was boosted with a US$20 billion kitty announced by former president Hu Jintao during the Forum on China Africa Co-operation.
These institutions have been labelled policy banks precisely because they implement broad multilateral and bilateral agreements made between Chinese and African leaders. In multiple interviews with corporate chiefs of Chinese companies, it became evident that Chinese companies are often in fierce competition for funds from these policy banks, putting paid to the monolithic view that Chinese officials favour some state-owned companies over others. Intriguingly, competition is sometimes fiercest between subsidiaries of a ‘mother’ company engaging in battles in East Africa as an ongoing case of railway construction works in Uganda demonstrates.

A case in point to demonstrate the policy-based approach to project financing is the Entebbe-Kampala Highway now under construction. Records indicate that the 51 km project was broached at a bilateral discussion between Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni and former Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao on the sidelines of the fourth Sharm el Sheikh FOCAC meeting in 2009. This is when Premier Wen pledged a concessionary loan support from Exim Bank for the toll road among other projects.

“ar win the contract, we had to offer the best plan against competition from other Chinese firms. For many months, I worked day and night to figure out the best architectural and financial plan,” an official at the China Communications Company (parent company of China Road and Bridge Company) explains, adding that East African managers of Chinese companies prospect for business by reviewing agreements made by Chinese and East African leaders and analysing development plans in the region, over and above initiating projects with governments based on proactive discussions.

**Chinese labour**

One emotive issue that has refused to go away is the charge that Chinese companies come along with their own labour in a putative scheme to dump unemployed Chinese people in Africa. Virtually all managers of Chinese companies pushed back on this allegation. But perhaps the most sober explanation was provided by the British-educated, young and suave Chief Representative of AVIC International in Uganda, Sun Jingfeng. “Let’s face it. When you come to a country like Uganda and you want to put up a nice modern building to high standards, you definitely need some of the best professionals in the field. Now, what do you do when you find that there are very few local technical professionals to hire? You have to make a choice and often, we bring in Chinese technicians only because there are no local architects or engineers to meet high standards,” he says, adding that if there were local engineers, architects, surveyors and other construction professionals, his company wouldn’t hesitate hiring them, as this would reduce the costs of bringing staff from China, paying for their periodic travel to China besides the cultural challenges that Chinese workers have to contend with.

“In Kenya for instance, we have hired engineers who take charge of certain complicated functions on projects because they are available and able. But if you want to bring them over to Uganda it becomes a problem, because locals here want to be employed in those positions even if they don’t qualify. The alternative is usually to get Chinese professionals to start training locals so that in future we can cut down drastically on the number of skilled Chinese workers,” Sun explains as he takes this writer around a huge 12-storey complex his company is building for the Kenyan insurance firm, UAP Insurance, in Kampala’s Nakawa area. Not far away in Butabika suburbs abutting the shores of Lake Victoria, his company is in the final phases of putting up a campus for an international school owned by Indian investors.

One of the rumours about Chinese construction workers doing the rounds in East Africa is that most of them are Chinese prisoners. The Spartan, sweatshop demeanour exhibited by Chinese construction workers is often presumed as evidence that they could be prisoners. Peking University Professor and noted Africanist, Li Anshan, gives some of the reasons for such perceptions citing his own research work in Africa. “Failing to distinguish between a Caucasian and an Asian, many an African considers all Chinese as white people. ‘White’ is tantamount to affluence. Long hours of back-breaking labour and residence in construction camps are not affluence and therefore the labouring Chinese must be under some form of punishment, the kind meted out to unwilling prisoners,” he says, amid the comings and goings of African students into his office at the Centre for African Studies at this foremost Chinese university.

**Regional integration**

While it is often thought that Chinese companies are in
a zero-sum competition with other economic powers as well as multilateral financial institutions, others see lots of opportunities for trilateral collaboration. EAC Secretary General Richard Sezibera, for instance, cites the recently completed Nairobi (Athi River)-Arusha highway as an exemplar of multiple partners converging to deliver an infrastructural artery that feeds into EAC integration goals.

“The expansion and revamping of this road was funded to the tune of USD164.3 million by the Tanzanian and Kenyan governments with financial support from Africa Development Bank (in conjunction with the World Bank) and Japan International Co-operation Agency, while China Geo-Engineering Corporation undertook part of the construction work,” he explains, pointing out that the fact that funding comes from a non-Chinese source but a Chinese company wins the contact is an indication of healthy co-operation.

More significant, perhaps, is the fact that the Chinese infrastructure companies are seen as contributing to regional integration. Flipping through a picture album featuring the launch of the Nairobi-Arusha highway, EAC communications manager, Richard Owora Othieno, points out presidents Mwai Kibaki (Kenya), Jakaya Kikwete (Tanzania), Yoweri Museveni (Uganda), Paul Kagame (Rwanda) and Pierre Nkurunziza (Burundi) digging shovels into the ground in 2009 and launching the road at its completion in 2013.

“Our long term objective is to build infrastructure linking the five countries, a plan in which Chinese agencies are playing a crucial role whether as contractor or as source of funding and often as both contractor and funder,” Dr Sezibera explains, throwing in other infrastructural projects such as a ring road around Lake Victoria and the so-called central corridor linking Tanzania to Uganda and on to Rwanda and Burundi.

Part of the 967 km A2 highway from Nairobi via Isiolo and Turbi to Moyale is being built by China Wu Yi, which clearly forms part of this integration vision as it links Kenya to landlocked Ethiopia. When I sought out the Kenya-based Chinese manager of Wu Yi, he was upbeat about work on the section of road farmed out to his company. “We are working very hard, we work day and night. We actually hope to complete everything ahead of time,” says the manager, Wu Bao as he reclines on a wall at the makeshift construction site in northern Kenya.

Holistically, the recent road rehabilitation and fresh construction from Dar es Salaam to the Kenya-Ethiopia border stands at 1,720 km, most of the sections having the dragon's footprint and a major cog in the Trans African Highway network.

Provincial governments

The huge portfolio of China Wu Yi's projects in East Africa introduces yet another less appreciated fact about Chinese companies. While many might imagine that all Chinese state-owned companies are Beijing-based and national, a good number of companies are actually international contracting arms of provincial governments. China Wu Yi is for instance associated with the Fujian Provincial Government in south east China.

In Uganda, the Chongqing International Construction Corporation, the international contracting arm of the southwestern China municipal government of Chongqing City – the fourth largest city in China – has been involved in major road projects. Speaking to Ms Wang, country manager, at the company's Namanve headquarters on the Kampala-Jinja Highway, one learns that the company has been in Uganda for over two decades with infrastructure works such as the ongoing road linking Fort Portal to the border of the Democratic Republic of Congo to mention but one. The compound has several construction machinery and vehicles, an indicator of the longevity of Chongqing International in Uganda.

As Chinese Ambassador to Burundi, Yu Xuzhong, explains, some of the most active companies in the construction industry in the country are Jiangsu International Economic and Technical Corporation and the Anhui Foreign Economic Construction Group, both of them associated with their respective provincial governments. “Between them, these two companies have had a lasting footprint on paved roads in the country since 1981,” says the ambassador at his chancery-cum-residence sharing a fence with the presidential palace.
Private companies

To demonstrate that not only Chinese state-owned enterprises are active in large projects in Rwanda, Chinese Ambassador Shu Zhan walked this writer out of his Kigali Chancery and pointed at massive steel and iron scaffolding right across the road. “You asked about the concept of win-win and mutual benefits between China and Africa. This project says it all since it is a joint venture by Chinese and Rwandan investors (known as New Century Development Ltd) and discussions are on for it to be acquired by Marriot Hotel (a US hospitality chain),” he says of the US$60 million project on course for completion at the time of writing.

Not too far away in the Kimihurura area of Kigali, the Beijing Construction Engineering Company is undertaking the 126,000 m² Kigali Convention Centre, a joint initiative between the government of Rwanda (51%) and private Rwandan investors. “This facility is aimed at boosting Rwanda’s conference tourism capacity as the facilities we are working on include a five star hotel, amphitheatres, shopping malls and others,” Wang Zheng, the general manager, explains. However it was apparent as of March 2013 that the project that started in 2009 was behind schedule and Wang attributes the delays to back-and-forth consultations on architectural and structural designs with a German company responsible for the entire project.

In Bujumbura, the Beijing Urban Construction Company is an illustration of private ‘dragon head’ companies undertaking foreign aid development projects. When this writer visited the site, Hu Xiaohe, the project manager was overseeing deep excavations on the site where a technical training institute will soon stand, next to the US Embassy. “When we first started work here, US Embassy officials were curious to understand what we were working on so close to their building. After our explanation and assurances by the Burundian government, they have left us alone to do our work,” he says.

Some of the Chinese-owned companies indeed operate in the hinterlands of East Africa. Travelling well over eight hours from Nairobi to Awendo in western Kenya, this writer met one Mr Yu, a general manager at Danaff Kenya Ltd, a medium-sized infrastructure development company incorporated in Kenya in 2005. Yu and his colleagues are overseeing a US$1.6 million Korea International Cooperation Agency funded water supply project to supply water to a small town called Awendo, a stone’s throw away from the South Nyanza Sugar Company. On inquiring if Danaff had waterworks as its specialty, Mr Yu, a sociable man with a knack for photography, opens his laptop to show photographs of projects his company had done in the past including housing, roads, schools and dams.

Government buildings

China’s embracing of East Africa has all the hallmarks of soft power for which stadiums and ‘friendship’ hospitals in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and Rwanda are perhaps better known. In recent times, however, East African states have benefitted from superlative government buildings donated by China. In the heart of Kampala city stands the Ministry of Foreign Affairs office block, a grey edifice with an elegant foyer where VIPs can be received, and boasting a glazed frontal view to complete the image of modernity. A few blocks away sits the even more glamorous 10-storey twin-tower Office of the President set in wooded, mowed grounds. When this writer visited the twin towers in March 2013, it was virtually a throwback to the government buildings one sees in Beijing.

Explaining construction work on a presidential palace in Gisenyi, on the outskirts of Bujumbura, Ambassador Yu says that the project was requested by the Burundian government based on the fact that the current president’s residence is old and small.

When the new US$200 million African Union building was inaugurated during a meeting of heads of state in Addis Ababa in January 2012, all African leaders were unanimous in their praise for the Chinese donation. One voice of dissent from the African continent was Rwanda’s President Paul Kagame, whom The East African newspaper quoted as saying the project was but a tip of the iceberg of Africa’s dependency syndrome. Whether President Kagame, often frank and uninhibited, was quoted out of context or was reacting on the spur of the moment is today a matter of conjecture. Notwithstanding the veracity of Kagame’s comments, Rwandan officials have been using the Chinese-built US$8.5 million Ministry of Foreign Affairs office block from 2008, four years before the handover of the AU headquarters. In addition, a recent grant will see to the construction of a new government complex in Kigali.
SOUTH CHINA TIGERS LOST IN THE AFRICAN WILDERNESS

By Liu Hongqiao

First published in Chinese in Caixin Weekly on 9 December 2013

The Free State province in the heartland of South Africa is a vast area of hot, flat plains, dry maize fields and big blue skies. It would seem an unlikely habitat for tigers, yet about 200 km from Bloemfontein, the provincial and national judicial capital, is the Laohu Valley Reserve, named after and home to the South China tiger, or laohu in Chinese.

A decade ago two South China tiger cubs were sent to the reserve from a Chinese zoo, and what began as an effort to save the species from the brink of extinction evolved into an ambitious ‘rewilding’ project with the goal of releasing the big cats back into their natural habitat. But while their numbers and hunting skills have grown in their temporary home, so far none have returned to China.

There are now fifteen South China tigers residing at Laohu Valley and according to tiger supervisor, Vivienne McKenzie, nine of them are already capable hunters.

“All the data we collected in Laohu Valley indicates that if the tigers can hunt here, they can hunt in China.”

University of Pretoria post-doctoral fellow Maria

Two South China tiger cubs were sent to the Free State reserve in 2003.
Fabregas, who does ethological and reproductive research on the South China tiger, explains that though the landscape differs in the two countries, the vast plains and valleys in Laohu Valley actually provide less cover for the tigers than the forest landscape in southern China, making it an even more difficult place for hunting.

The South China tiger is exclusive to China and believed to be extinct in the wild. There are only about a hundred in the world outside of Laohu Valley, all in Chinese zoos.

In 2003 China’s State Forestry Administration (SFA) partnered with environmental protection organisations, conservationists and wildlife specialists to propose a plan to send tiger cubs to South Africa. The goal was to release the tigers back into the wild and to restore the wild tiger population.

The original plan was to train the tigers in South Africa and return them to China in 2008, but the SFA has been unable to find a suitable place to release the rewilded tigers. They have now been in Africa five years longer than planned.

The financial backer and manager of Laohu Valley may now also be facing more challenges. Li Quan, a former fashion executive for Gucci and founder of Save China’s Tigers, has filed for divorce from her husband, the foundation’s financial backer. The divorce is likely to put financial stress on the trust.

It may be time for the tigers to come home, but where in a badly deforested China can they go?

**Cathay and Tiger Woods**

The South China tiger is one of China’s oldest tiger breeds and was very numerous in the past. Official statistics indicate that in 1949 there were still 4,000 of them in the wild. However, 50 to 60 years ago the tiger was declared a ‘pest’ by officials, opening it up to legal hunting. As a result over 3,000 were killed in a short space of time.

In the past 20 years not a single South China tiger has been observed in the wild. In 2007, a resident of Zhenping county in the northwestern province of Shaanxi, claimed to have photographed a wild South China tiger, but this was later proven to be a hoax. Experts now agree that the breed is extinct in the wild.

In 2009 the International Union for the Conservation of Nature named the South China tiger as the world’s most endangered tiger subspecies. All the animals alive today are the zoo-bred progeny of six wild cats caught in the 1950s and 60s.

The idea to send the tigers to South Africa originated with Quan, a native of Beijing. In 1999, she spent time observing the successes of wildlife reserves and ecological tourism in Africa. A year later, Li and her husband, Stuart Bray, founded the Save China’s Tigers Foundation in Britain. The foundation was later registered in the US as well as in Hong Kong.

In May 2002 the foundation purchased 30,000 hectares of land in South Africa as a base for rewilding South China tigers. The Chinese Tigers South African Trust was established to serve as the executive organisation for the rewilding project and to raise funds.

Later in 2002 representatives of the foundation, the trust and the SFA’s National Wildlife Research and Development Centre met in Beijing to sign an agreement for breeding the species and reintroducing it into the wild, and that marked the formal launch of the project in South Africa.

Specialists from South Africa, the US, Japan, Brazil and many other nations lent great support to the project. In 2003, an executive team comprised of leading South African wildlife specialists and conservationists began planning the layout of Laohu Valley and methods for rewilding the tigers.
In September 2003 two tiger cubs – Cathay and Hope – arrived in South Africa, making them the first South China tigers on the African continent. A year later cubs named Tiger Woods and Madonna were also flown to the reserve. Then in 2007 an adult tiger, ‘No. 327’, was sent from a zoo in Suzhou in the eastern province of Jiangsu, in order to start the breeding program.

Raising a tiger is hard, but teaching it to live in the wild is even harder. Over the next decade, more tigers were bred from the first arrivals, but there were misfortunes too. No. 327 died in a fight. Hope and three more cubs also died.

Where is home?

The agreement signed in 2002 stipulated the reintroduction of the tigers into the wild in China by 2008. That deadline came and went, but the tigers remained abroad. There is still no confirmed date for their return.

From 2003 to 2004, with approval from the SFA, members of the foundation and the wildlife centre brought together Chinese and international experts to evaluate seven candidate sites around the country. In January 2004, experts from China and South Africa suggested after field studies that it was feasible to reintroduce the tigers into conservation areas.

Eventually Zixi county, in the eastern province of Jiangxi, and Liuyang city, in the central province of Hunan, were picked. (‘City’ here is a level of government, and such designations in China often include large rural areas.) These two areas, experts said, not only satisfied the requirements of the tigers for habitation and breeding in the wild, but also had good prospects for environmental tourism.

The SFA issued notices to the provincial forestry bureaus of Jiangxi and Hunan in 2006, establishing an area in northern Zixi and the Zhushuqiao region of Liuyang as reintroduction sites.

But reintroducing the tigers to these areas has proven much more difficult than anticipated. The relocation of the human populations in these areas, both in excess of one thousand people, would require approval from the State Council, China’s cabinet. The land in these regions is currently designated as ‘agricultural’, and changing this status would require approval from the Ministry of Land and Resources. So in the end, the animals did not move.

The SFA again organised a panel to choose a site in China in 2010, and three sites were picked: Wufeng Houhe nature reserve zone, in the central province of Hubei; Matou Mountain, again in Jiangxi’s Zixi county; and Huping Mountain, in Shimen county in the central province of Hunan. The document also suggested that the Meihuashan South China tiger breeding center in Fujian province in the east could be expanded for rewilding and rejuvenation of the new tiger population.

Three more years have passed, but the central government still has not signed off on the three sites. The reason for the delay is unclear, but even if officials do finally give their permission, three to five years would be needed to prepare the sites.

Even if fees paid to experts and the costs of relocating human populations are excluded, preparing a suitable habitat is expensive. Brad Nilson, who advises an investment company under the Laohu Valley Reserve trust, says the organisation has budgeted 180 million yuan for the preparation of a tiger reintroduction zone.

Lu Jun, director of the SFA’s wildlife research centre, says the majority of the tiger’s former habitat are regions that have been highly developed.

“Restoring a suitable habitat for the survival of the South China tiger is not something you can do just by talking about it,” Lu says. “It’s already a much more complicated proposition than originally anticipated, so progress on the project is proceeding much more slowly than originally anticipated.”

Lu says that renovations to the Meihuashan breeding centre are set for completion in early 2014; it will be a rewilding training and population rejuvenation centre based on the Laohu Valley model.

“Meihuashan already has the basic conditions required for the return of the tigers,” Lu says. “The South China tigers that come back from South Africa will be given appropriate training in Meihuashan.”
The wrong tiger?

In the spring of 2003, before any Chinese tigers ever travelled to Africa, a group under the International Union for the Conservation of Nature that specialises in wild cats expressed reservations about the Save China’s Tigers Foundation’s plans to rewild tigers in South Africa.

The group includes over 100 cat specialists and wildlife conservationists from around the world, and is widely considered to be one of the world’s most authoritative independent research organisations in its field.

The group felt that experience has proven that all reintroduction projects are risky, and the animals’ familiarity with their habitat and local game stocks are important factors behind population restoration. In addition, the degree of inbreeding in domestically raised South China tigers is exceptionally high, meaning there was only a limited chance for the survival of a sustainable, diverse wild population.

Lu says that the efforts to save the tigers “have already far exceeded the scope for saving any species, and won’t be a simple matter of relying on science and technology alone.”

The director of the World Wildlife Fund’s China Species Program, Fan Zhiyong, also has doubts. A single South China tiger could range over 50 square kilometres, but such a suitable area would be difficult to find in southern China now. Fan also says that Africa’s game populations are dense, but China’s no longer are.

This naturally raises questions as to whether the foundation would ever find the space and food in China for the tigers to thrive again.

Another point of contention in expert circles concerns whether the genetic makeup of South China tigers rewilded in South Africa is pure. Xie Yan, a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Sciences’ Institute of Zoology, says the significance of saving the South China tiger lies in saving its genes.

“When we test individual South China tigers that have recently been bred, their genes do not truly represent the subspecies. A lot of genetic material from the Indochinese tiger has gotten mixed in. So the genetic significance of breeding these individuals to preserve the distinctive heredity of the South China tiger is another question mark.”

Some at the international conservation union say China might be better off trying to save the four subspecies of tiger that remain in the country. According to Xie, the Amur tiger, also known as the Siberian tiger, native to north-eastern China and Siberia, is not yet extinct in the wild. The wild population still has healthy numbers, she says, meaning there is still time to build conservation areas on the Sino-Russian border.
On a typically sweltering day in mid-June 2014, three Chinese men carrying bulky backpacks disembarked from a plane at Juba International Airport in the capital of South Sudan. At any other time, the Chinese might not have been conspicuous as they walked hurriedly towards the terminal building. But this was at the height of the civil war that erupted in late 2013 when South Sudanese President Salva Kiir accused his sacked vice president, General Riek Machar, of attempting a military coup.

For one of the South Sudanese officials attached to a contingent of Ugandan troops at the airport, the return of the Chinese was a sign that normalcy was being restored. “You see,” the official said excitedly, “the Chinese are back to carry on with business.”

The Chinese can often be seen on the streets of Juba where they jostle for space on crowded narrow pavements as traffic, including heavily guarded convoys carrying government officials, roll along and dodge dexterously to avoid pond-sized potholes that dot the country’s main roads.

“Looking at how busy this place is,” a Ugandan soldier says, “one can’t imagine that only a few months ago, these streets were littered with dead bodies.” The soldier is recalling the horrors of the war that over 400 Chinese were caught up in, and who had to be evacuated to neighbouring Kenya.

However, even before the smoke from the guns cleared, the Chinese were back, surprising even the Ugandan soldiers who had fought battles on President Kiir’s side to restore normalcy. Sensing the pivotal role the Ugandan troops had in the evacuation and in restoring order, the Chinese government has supported the continued presence of Ugandan troops in Juba even with international pressure for them to pull out.

Lucrative deals

China is keen on securing its investment in the region. Until 2011, Sudan (before it split into two) was China’s second largest provider of oil in Africa after Angola, and supplied 5% of China’s total crude oil imports. In the neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), a Chinese consortium Sicomines won a US$3 billion deal
in which the consortium will construct infrastructure for the government in exchange for mineral concessions with Congo’s state mining agency, Gécamines.

Another Chinese consortium is among three top contenders for the construction of the Inga III project, part of an even more ambitious project, the US$80 billion Grand Inga project, which could produce 40,000 MW annually, twice the capacity of China’s Three Gorges Dam.

In Kenya, another Chinese consortium has won the initial contracts for work on the US$26 billion Lamu Port South Sudan Ethiopia Transport (LAPSSET) corridor project. In Kenya, Uganda and South Sudan, Chinese companies are winning all the contracts for the construction of the region’s other biggest infrastructure project, the multibillion standard gauge railway that, once completed, will connect the three.

Last year, a Chinese company, Sinohydro, won a US$1.7 billion contract to construct the Karuma power dam in Uganda. These lucrative deals for Chinese companies have sparked a sentiment in Uganda’s diplomatic circles that China seizes all the opportunities, often unfairly, even if it doesn’t contribute as much to the region’s priorities like peace and security. In 2012 friction emerged between the European Union (EU) and the Ugandan government over the awarding of the Karuma dam contract, which even sparked speculation that the Europeans were contemplating withdrawing their support for the Ugandan army.

“We are saying that it should not only be the EU, other stakeholders should also contribute,” said then-head of the EU Mission in Uganda, Roberto Ridolfi. Brig. Gen. Gerald Aherne, the head of the EU Training Mission-Somalia (EUTM), also chimed in, “All I can say is that the European Union is the single biggest contributor of peace and security in the region. It doesn’t always get credit for it but it should.”

Peacekeeping roles

However, China is busy changing its approach to Africa and expanding its security footprint, if only by deploying more peacekeepers to the region. Following South Sudan’s split from Khartoum, most of the oilfields were in the south where China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) has invested over US$7 billion and controls a 40% stake in the country’s biggest oil consortium, the Greater Nile Petroleum Operating Company (GNPOC).

The fighting had threatened to completely halt oil production. With this at stake, China mounted pressure at several other levels. In Addis Ababa, three top Chinese diplomats – the Ambassador to Ethiopia, Xie Xiaoyan; special representative on African Affairs, Zhong Jianhua; and China’s Foreign Affairs Minister, Wang Yi – pushed for talks between Kiir and Machar.

As the three engaged locally, China pushed the UN Security Council members to expand the mandate of the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) to include the protection of its oil installations, according to the online publication, Foreign Policy.

The decision followed intense negotiations, and as a sweetener, China pledged a battalion of 850 soldiers to fortify UNMISS. China initially had 343 peacekeepers in Wau, Bahr El-Ghazal State, under UNMISS. The latest deployment pushed to 1,193 the number of its blue berets in South Sudan, and to 3,010 in the entire 16 UN missions the world over – completely dwarfing the contribution of all the other five UN Security Council members combined.

The distribution of Beijing’s blue-berets is telling. Of the 3,010 peacekeepers, Africa hogs 88% (2,661), leaving only 12% (349) for the other nations. Even within Africa, it is Sudan, South Sudan and the DRC, where China has the biggest oil and mining concessions, that take the lion’s share at 62.5% (1,664). Only 38% or 997 peacekeepers are left to cover Mali, Liberia, Cote d’Ivoire, and Western Sahara.

China touts its blue berets

China’s 2013 white paper on the state of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) describes its soldiers as “tough, brave, and devoted” peacekeepers, who “accomplish all their tasks in an exemplary manner”. In a June 2014 report, Protecting China’s Overseas Interests, security experts at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) attribute this trend to the need to protect a growing number of Chinese nationals in international conflict zones, several of which are in Africa, and the expansion of Chinese energy interests overseas.

So far, South Africa has an estimated 300,000 of the over one million Chinese immigrants in Africa. The rest are scattered in Kenya, the DRC, the Central African Republic (CAR), Zambia, Angola, Sudan and South Sudan (among others) where China has mining, construction and crude oil concessions.

These interests have put pressure and forced China
to increasingly get involved in promoting security in the region even if that involvement has meant contradicting its non-interventionist policy. The deployment of combat troops in Mali and the various efforts employed to solve the South Sudan crisis have pushed China’s involvement a notch higher and even sparked predictions that at this rate China might in the near future even consider an African Command just like the US, which boasts the US Africa Command (AFRICOM) and the Lemonnier military base in Djibouti.

“I think the most prominent shift in China’s foreign policy in this regard has been putting boots on the ground through the auspices of the UN, both in Mali and now in South Sudan,” says interim head for the Centre for Chinese Studies (CSS), Dr Ross Anthony.

Apart from its significant oil interests in the region, Anthony says, China was significantly involved in facilitating the South-North peace process and purely in terms of reputational capital China wants South Sudan to be a success story as it increases its standing in the region.
“This is possibly why China is encouraging military support from Uganda,” Anthony says, “This is marking a shift in Beijing’s security role in Africa.” As for Mali where China does not have significant commercial interests, Anthony says, Beijing might have realised that keeping the Sahel stable contributes toward more general stability within West Africa, where China does have significant investments.

“Additionally there is more pressure on China to become a responsible world power,” Anthony says, “I think a key priority for China is to contribute toward stability in Africa so that it creates a better investment climate for them in Africa.”

More needed from China

But peacekeeping has evolved and is an increasingly risky venture. Six months after the first shot was fired in the civil war, signs of destruction are still vivid in Bor, the main town of Jonglei State.

A group of Indian and South Korean peacekeepers were stationed at the stretch of cracked brown earth that is Bor airfield. These peacekeepers were involved in some of the worst fighting with a militia of youths who broke into the UN base in Bor and opened fire on people who had fled the fighting. By the time the peacekeepers overwhelmed the militia, fifty people were dead and over a hundred injured.

There were no Chinese peacekeepers in Bor. China’s only 343 peacekeepers at the time were in neighbouring Bahr El-Gazel. These were mainly a small unit of combat troops meant to offer security to the bulk of the units of medical experts, engineers, and logistical experts. It was a typical Chinese deployment, as occurred during the UN Mission in Congo (MUNUSCO) in neighbouring DRC.

In hot zones like the DRC, Chinese peacekeepers are not among those seen patrolling the streets. Instead they are part of the peacekeepers manning checkpoints like the one at Ruzizi on the border between Burundi and the DRC. This is enemy territory, home of the notorious M23 rebels opposed to the government in Kinshasa who have refused to disarm in spite of UN Security Council resolutions.

Occasionally, the other peacekeepers are seen mumbling a few things to the locals, but the Chinese only nod and smile. “The Chinese are hardworking,” one of the officials says, “their only challenge is that they do not speak any of the languages spoken here, which makes communication with them hard.”

Apart from putting boots on the ground, Beijing has occasionally given money, including a US$2.3 million cheque as support for the Ugandan army, which still has the largest number of troops in the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM).

In 2013, China also gave US$2.6 million’s worth of security communications equipment to Kenya, which also has troops with AMISOM. The rest of the assistance has gone directly to the AU. But the growing sense that Beijing can do better is felt in several African capitals.

Compared to the US and EU, which are considered the key regional security partners, China has over the years also only offered small grants and often stuck to its non-interventionist policy.

In the Kenyan capital Nairobi, President Uhuru Kenyatta said in May 2014 that China possesses substantial political, diplomatic and financial assets, which, if fully applied, could amount to a game-changer in the region’s peace and security.

Following the attack on a Kenyan shopping mall in 2013, Professor He Wenping of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences said that China, as a leading investor in Kenya and other terrorist-prone parts of Africa, needed to get involved in fighting terrorism in Africa to at least secure its investments.

Other experts argue that because most of China’s engagements with Africa are managed largely through state-to-state relations, it is often criticized by opponents of incumbent governments.

In Libya amid the collapse of Muammar Gaddafi’s regime in 2011, for instance, Beijing suffered losses of about US$20 billion, according to Chinese media reports. China was also stuck with over 30,000 stranded citizens and had to borrow planes and ships to evacuate them.

In October 2007, the Defra oilfield in Sudan run by the Chinese was attacked by the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) rebel group. Its commander, Mohamed Bahr Hamdeen, gave the oil companies in South Kordofan a week to leave Sudan, saying that the rebels consider
all foreign oil companies to be killers because they help the government buy the weapons which they use to kill women and children.

Two months later, JEM attacked another Chinese-run oil field in South Kordofan, the Heglig oilfield, saying that China was trading petroleum for “our blood”. The following year, militants kidnapped some CNPC employees at an oilfield in South Kordofan, and five of them were killed during the ordeal.

In 2011, another 29 Chinese construction workers were abducted in the same province and were released after almost two weeks of intense negotiations. The lesson, observers say, was that as long as China is seen as a partner of host governments, those who oppose these governments will target its interests, either as a means to reduce its support for these governments or as a means of leverage.

Some critics, however, suggest that China has to take more interest in security matters in the region because its weapons are fuelling the wars. An October 2013 SIPRI report named China as the leading exporter of Small Arms and Lights Weapons (SALW) and a popular supplier for states looking for inexpensive or alternative sources of SALW.

The report showed that Chinese-made arms have been found in conflict zones like Sudan, CAR, the DRC, South Sudan and even Somalia. Even as negotiations over the current South Sudan crisis continue, China went ahead and closed an arms deal with South Sudan which had initially been suspended.

However, Dr Anthony says that one has to keep in mind that the US, Russia and European states are also large sellers of arms to African countries. From the broader perspective, he says, as China puts more personnel and investment into Africa, it will have a growing stake in peace and security in the region. “China will continue to try and be seen as a benevolent military presence in Africa, but having a growing interest in securing its investments here will entail that, at some point, they may have to take sides.”
JOHANNESBURG’S CHINESE MALL OVERHAUL: REVAMPING THE RETAIL MODEL

By Shandukani Mulaudzi

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Gam Saan is the informal name the first Chinese immigrants to South Africa used to refer to Johannesburg. Meaning ‘Mountain of Gold’, the city is where many still come to seek opportunities for a better life. The Crown Mines area is near Langlaagte, where the first of the Witwatersrand’s gold was discovered. Although 66 mines that operated on the reef have closed, today this area has become a gold mine for those venturing into Chinese retail. Signs on Main Reef Road direct you to no less than eight different Chinese malls all offering an authentic Chinese shopping experience.

China Mall, Mart and Centre

China Cash and Carry, China Shopping Centre, China Mart and China Fujian City are all on the same block and right around the corner you can make your way to China Multiplex. To visitors who are not familiar with Chinese malls, they appear too similar. Beads, bedding, curtains, toys and other haberdashery stores leave one reeling from a sense of déjà vu.

In some malls, more attention is paid to clearly lit walkways, which are designed to make the customer want to spend time there, while many others have poor lighting and narrow walkways. Whatever the lighting and flooring conditions may be, the lure of cheap goods and great deals cannot be ignored.

There is high demand for Chinese supplies in South Africa with about R70 billion spent on Chinese imports from January to June 2013, according to South Africa’s Department of Trade and Industry (DTI). The DTI estimates that 785 million units of retail goods – stocked in Chinese malls – such as footwear, headgear and artificial hair, were imported from China in July 2013. The real number is higher though.

Some imported goods sold in these malls are included in different commodity categories. For this reason, the true figure is difficult to determine. The demand for these goods is high, but the number of malls has caused some market saturation and increased competition.

Steve Yeh, general manager and head of security at China Mart, believes the Chinese retail mall structure is effective as it offers “one single building where someone can get everything under one roof”. Although China Mart could be criticised for having too many shops trading in the same goods, Yeh says in the end this results in the customer benefitting. “If they [shop owners] are selling the same thing, then they have to knock [down] their prices, right? So the customer benefits.”
The Chinese way of property management

Robin Xu only had one container of Chinese imported goods when he arrived in South Africa. Xu was already a businessman in China before he moved here and his entrepreneurial spirit saw an opportunity to introduce Chinese trading to the Johannesburg community. When the old Makro discount centre in Amalgam burnt down, Xu acquired the vacant land and began building his first mall. Today, he owns three China Malls, each with about 500 shops and parking space for 3,000 vehicles.

In addition to the one in Amalgam, Xu’s Sino-African Property (Pty) Ltd has developed China Mall West in Rodepoort, west of Johannesburg, and China Mall Durban. Xu’s basic strategy has been to take old rundown buildings and transform them. The Rodepoort China Mall was formerly known as Highgate Mall, while the mall in Durban was called The Wheel.

According to Lisa Keyser, the manager of China Mall West, the China Mall group is the only family-owned Chinese retail node in South Africa. Keyser says the family-owned approach is in line with the Chinese belief in merging work and family.

As part of its diversified offering, Sino-African Property has constructed residential apartments situated behind the China Malls. “The Chinese like to live close to where they work. We have 100 units with about 400 people living there. It’s convenient because this way our tenants just come, do their work during the day and then they just close up shop and go upstairs,” she says.

Unlike traditional retail property groups, Keyser says the China Mall group offers sectional title ownership. The property is in such high demand that there is a three-year waiting list for space within China Mall. Keyser says one of the main challenges their tenants face is the fact that they do not have identity documents and cannot open bank accounts as ‘natural persons’.

South African law states that it takes five years to be recognised as a permanent resident. In order to help their tenants deal with their banking problem, the China Mall group contacted the South African Revenue Service (SARS). They were told that if their clients were registered as closed corporations, they could get business bank accounts and official documents allowing them to trade easily.

Keyser says by selling sectional titles, they were able to share risk and also deal with fewer clients. The people who own sectional titles can sub-lease their property to small business owners, but other tenants do not have that privilege.

“We offer in-house bonds for our clients who want to own sectional titles as some of them are unable to secure bonds with the banks. Our interest rates are higher than the banks as the risk is high for us too,” Keyser says.

Yeh says China Mart offers sectional titles too. The owners of China Mart are sectional title holders of different nationalities and cultures. “We started building in 2002 and completed in 2004. Today this place is under about 120 sectional title holders. Basically there was an advertisement asking who was interested and a whole lot of people came together, chucked in some money and built the place.”

Erwin Pon, business development director at Rand Merchant Bank, explains that this opportunity to purchase a section of land within Chinese malls sets these nodes apart from the more common retail model.

“By doing this, they create a bigger demand for space within the malls for those people who want to own their own property.”

Pon believes that this was a smart decision by owners of Chinese nodes as they understand the desire people have to own property rather than rent forever. Shop owners then have something they can call their own and work harder to keep their assets afloat.

Although this method of ownership works for Chinese retail nodes, Senzo Mncadi of Propertuity Ltd, the development company for the Maboneng Precinct in Johannesburg, says selling retail spaces is not an option for them.

“One thing about the China Malls that you may have noticed is that they sell the same things and we cannot have the same kind of thing happen here. In order to maintain control over that we cannot sell retail space,” he says.
Maboneng is an urban space in the Johannesburg inner city comprising boutiques, eateries, markets and residential buildings, all developed from abandoned buildings.

The need to diversify and differentiate

Keyser believes China Mall was the pioneer of Chinese retail. “When we started, we were the only ones in our area doing this kind of thing [Chinese retail and wholesale] so we did not compete with anyone else. Now, with so many other malls in the area, we need to find a way to be different. They call themselves China Mall but we own the trademark,” she says with a smile.

Pon agrees that one of the challenges for Chinese retail development is differentiation and diversification. He says the market must adjust and develop to keep up with changing trends and increasing competition and adds that some owners of these nodes have already started developing plans.

“Currently some property developers are evolving and realising the need for upmarket malls. As far as I know the owners of Dragon City have purchased a space and are looking into developing the ‘Sandton’ of China Malls.”

Yeh says in the future China Mart would like to move towards building a mall that could be likened to Cresta or Menlyn Park in Pretoria. He explains that the target market and new business model will be determined by the location.

“Obviously this would take a lot of hard work and planning. Location is very important. We cannot go to Sandton, for example, and build a mall like this [China Mart] selling goods like this [cheap imports]. We will also limit the number of people selling one type of thing. Otherwise people will just start shooting each other,” Yeh says with a raised eyebrow and a smile.

China Mall has already decided to spice things up with a little diversity. Keyser says the goal of the mall is to attract not only local but international business too. The group has decided to introduce a number of well-known chain stores like Pick n Pay and Legit to their malls. This strategy has already been adopted in their Durban mall and Keyser believes it has already increased their customer base.

“What is unique to our group is that we are trying to have a fusion of local Chinese and international clients as our tenants. China Mall has gone this route because South Africa is so diverse. At the moment we have about 60% of our tenants who are Chinese and the other 40% is made up of people from Pakistan, Turkey, Vietnam and of course other South African locals,” she says.

People come to China Mall from as far as Botshabelo (near Bloemfontein), East London, Cape Town and even Mozambique, says Keyser. If you want to buy in bulk, this is the perfect place to be. Small business owners can buy wholesale items at a fraction of the stated price, which she says they call the stock price. This price is offered to wholesalers who buy six or more of a type of product for their stores. This is what she believes makes China Mall stand out from other South African malls.

China Mall in Amalgam is a 100,000m² piece of land with an outdoor parking space that caters for 3,000 vehicles. The shopping complex building takes up 40,000m² and is divided into four conjoined sections that are two storeys high. The different parts are marked alphabetically, showing the order in which they were built.

The first visible section when driving in is clearly marked C. Section A, which is the oldest, is on the far left. On the far right, close to the newly developed block D, but separate from the main mall, there is a sign that reads: ‘Food Court’. There are roughly eight Chinese restaurants, offering both halaal and non-halaal meals.

Red and gold Chinese lanterns hang from the ceilings, matching the main colour scheme of the China

IF YOU WANT TO BUY IN BULK, THIS IS THE PERFECT PLACE TO BE. SMALL BUSINESS OWNERS CAN BUY WHOLESALE ITEMS AT A FRACTION OF THE STATED PRICE.
Mall trademark. With about 50 stores at the bottom and additional stalls in the walkway, there are too many options to go through in one afternoon.

Keyser says the rent charges are dependent on the positioning of the store in the mall. If the store is closer to the front entrance, the rent will be more expensive than that for a store at the back of the mall. The leases are offered on a one to 10-year period.

The stalls in the walkways are referred to as ‘yellow line stores’. Yellow lines are drawn to demarcate the space within which the owner of the stall can trade. If they trade beyond the yellow line they are in violation of their lease agreement, Keyser explains.

The emerging upmarket Chinese Mall

There are a handful of entrepreneurs who are looking to take the Chinese Mall model into new areas. On the corner of Republic Road and Jan Smuts Avenue in Randburg (Johannesburg) is China Discount Shopping Centre. Newly painted in red and blue, the building is decorated with Chinese markings.

Unlike the crowded Crown Mines malls, this mall is quiet. The parking lot, built for well over a 1,000 cars, is almost completely empty on an average day. Launched in May this year, the mall has more than 120 shops, many of them still bearing ‘To Let’ signs on the windows.

Angelique Ju, 26, the manager of China Discount Shopping Centre, says this location was attractive because there were no other Chinese developers operating there. “The malls in the Crown Mines are not running. There are too many, all grappling with each other. There aren’t enough Chinese people in Johannesburg for that kind of competition so we wanted to be in an area where we sell to everyone,” says Ju.

Although they have avoided the competition from similar Chinese nodes, the Centre has internal conflicts. Ju says the tenants are very competitive and steal one another’s ideas because of their similar clientele. She has to deal with quarrelling and tenants who accuse each other of spying on one another.

Shop owners claim their competitors visit other stores and pretend to be customers while they suss out the competition. Ju says the tenants who visit other stores then stock the same goods in their own shops. “The tenants spy on each other. It has reached a point where they have signs stopping one another from entering. Now the tenants are getting smart and they send the people working in their shops to do their spying for them,” Ju laughs.

The biggest problem is that many of her tenants have the same suppliers. The local retailers in the shopping centre are more successful because they import from various countries such as Dubai and even when they do import from China they get unique goods, she adds.

One developer who has already started exploring the higher end of the retail market chose the old Rivonia Square on the corner of Rivonia Boulevard and 9th Avenue in Rivonia as a prime spot for his development. Rivonia Oriental City is nestled among the clean streets of one of Johannesburg’s most affluent suburbs. Consumers are welcomed by red flags flying high and elephant statues on each side of the main entrance.

The layout of Rivonia Oriental City is different from those in the Crown Mines area. The wide walkways feel like those in upmarket Sandton, but the usual search for mall parking space is not part of the shopping experience. Although the mall is not packed with customers, tenants believe it has potential.

Rose Zhang, 27, likes the fact that it is different from other Chinese malls she has worked in. Zhang worked at the Oriental Cities in Centurion, Pretoria and Bruma, east of Johannesburg. Even though she has only been working in Rivonia for two months, she says she prefers working there because of the variety in customers and store owners. “There are black shop owners here too, which is good because we are mixed. This is South Africa.”

The mall has a Planet Fitness gym, an Ackermans, a Truworths clothing store and a Post Office. Having opened in May 2012, Rivonia’s Oriental City is a baby that has the potential to develop. However, as a look into the crystal ball of Chinese malls in South Africa, the number of unoccupied stores and near empty walkways may reflect a bleak future for the rest who want to move in this direction.
SECTION 3

ISSUES OF CONTENTION
CHINESE IVORY SMUGGLERS IN AFRICA

By Huang Hongxiang

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Dong has been sent to Mozambique by his employer, a Chinese communications company. At a busy weekly market he uses his phone to record a message of congratulations for a relative back home who is getting married, before buying several ivory bracelets: “Look, this is the biggest ivory market in Maputo. I’ll find some good stuff for you.”

The traders sell a range of crafts – paintings, carvings, cabinets, stone jewellery. But for Chinese shoppers, it’s just ‘the ivory market’.

“What are you looking for? Ivory? Ebony? We’ve got it, cheap!” The sellers are particularly happy to see Chinese customers and have learned the Chinese words needed to attract them. Cardboard boxes by their stalls are full of ivory products, only to be shown to Chinese shoppers. Ebony, a precious and slow-growing hardwood, is another popular choice with the Chinese.

Li, an employee of a Chinese oil company, has lived here for two years. He explains to newly-arrived colleagues how to get ivory bead bracelets back home.

Crafts market in Maputo.
“Cut the string and hide the beads in your luggage, then restring it when you get back – it’s still the same bracelet.”

Chen, a construction company employee, has more advice: “Just don’t take more than a kilogram or two at one time. You won’t have any trouble leaving here and if the customs in China find it you just have to hand it over – it’s cheap to buy here anyway.” He’s been working here for a year and visits the market every week, choosing the best products. He showed me his collection of bracelets, chopsticks, and stamps.

The growth of the illegal trade in ivory and the involvement of Chinese citizens is a cause of major concern both internationally and in China. In late October, customs officers in Xiamen, a city in south east China, seized a 12-tonne shipment of ivory worth 600 million yuan – the biggest ivory bust in Chinese history. Days later 1.8 tonnes of ivory were found in the Tanzanian home of a Chinese man.

The most common way in which Chinese get involved in the ivory trade in Africa is as souvenir hunters, such as Dong, Li and Chen. Employees sent here by their companies, migrants running small shops – many of them take small quantities of ivory on trips home. Ivory is cheap here, a bracelet might cost the equivalent of four or five hundred yuan, but would sell for up to 10,000 yuan on the black market in China. In Asia, a kilogram of ivory could cost up to US$3,000, but hunters in impoverished areas of Africa will sell it for about 300 yuan, and it still won’t be too expensive by the time it reaches Beijing.

It’s not just the huge profits that attract customers, they also know the risks are low. “In theory legitimate ivory products can be sold locally, they just can’t be exported,” says Baodai, an official at Quirimbas National Park in the north of the country.

Mozambique’s laws on ivory are weak, and the situation is worsened by rampant corruption. Legally each type of animal has a value, for example an elephant is worth about US$4 million. Poachers who are caught have to pay that value in compensation, but are freed in order to get the money and are only jailed if they can’t pay. And in reality poachers are rarely caught and those who are easily slip through the net. Corruption makes a mockery of the rules on the sale and export of ivory.

Zhu works at the airport: “Give the customs people 2,000 metical (400 yuan) and they won’t check your luggage.” As long as you’re happy to spend a little on bribes at the airport, he says, there’s no need to worry.

The souvenir hunters might only smuggle a little at a time, but the huge numbers of Chinese people travelling to Africa make for a huge market. In addition, there is another class of smuggler altogether.

The north of Mozambique is a major centre for elephant poaching. The region’s main port, Pemba, is home to many Chinese businessmen, mostly in the timber trade – shipping containers of local wood back home to China. According to an Environmental Investigation Agency study in 2011, many of the Chinese timber firms are involved in smuggling. They do not fell timber themselves, but buy it cheaply from locals, asking no questions about whether or not it has been cut legally, then ship it back home for sale. They exist in a grey zone, taking advantage of regulatory and customs loopholes, and often they are also involved in other shady businesses.

In 2011, 126 tusks were found in a container of timber belonging to a Chinese company, Tianhe, along with one rhino horn and some pangolin scales. The firm was ordered to pay its local partner MITI US$3.5 million, and the case was closed in August 2013.

Dewa, a MITI official, insisted in the local media that his company had nothing to do with their Chinese partner’s ivory smuggling. He expressed anger: “We might not have any evidence, but we know it’s not just the one
company that’s doing this. The Chinese are all at it!” Most of the port’s Chinese traders exist in a grey area and know only too well how to work within a corrupt system.

On a visit to a local Chinese timber firm I saw two uniformed Mozambicans watching Chinese soap operas on the office television.

“One is a customs officer, the other is with the police. In theory they’re here to inspect the containers as we load them, but they just come for the bribes and to watch television,” explains a company employee, smiling.

“Tianhe got caught as they failed to pay enough bribes, that was a false economy,” says Zhou, manager of another large Chinese timber firm. He claims his company is the only clean Chinese firm locally, but it too has been involved in multiple cases of timber smuggling, with local media referring to the firm as a repeat offender.

Higher up the chain there is a small number of more powerful smugglers. In Kenya an official with a Chinese firm told me that “a lot of ivory is moved via ‘diplomatic channels’, not by us ordinary folk.”

He was referring to corrupt government officials who take advantage of their diplomatic flights to avoid customs and smuggle ivory. These are all high-ranking figures, and so it is rare for there to be any arrests.

In June 2013, Xinhua’s English edition reported that a Chinese diplomat and a military officer had been detained in Zambia on suspicion of smuggling 27 kg of ivory worth US$140,000. But there were no details on who these people actually were.

When I asked the Chinese embassy in Mozambique about this, the response was that “the vast majority of Chinese citizens obey Mozambique’s laws, but it is possible that certain individuals trade in illegal ivory. The embassy will continue its education efforts.”
SWELTERING HEAT, GOLDEN DREAMS: CHINESE GALAMSEY IN GHANA

By Yang Meng

First published in Chinese in Southern Weekly on 9 January 2014

It is a sultry, humid Monday in Ghana. National military police wearing blue uniforms and black boots advance on a mine hidden in the depths of the Kakum National Park. When they are a kilometre away from the gold mine, they get out of their vehicles and proceed on foot over ground which has been compressed by heavy mining machinery. They turn past a road covered with banana leaves, and their field of view opens up: a work shed built of wooden planks towers in the centre of the clearing. The military police discover over 10 Chinese, all miners from Shanglin county in Guangxi province. All the facilities needed for work and life are present in this enclosed wilderness. The work shed has a generator, and Chinese cigarettes, toothpicks and scales have been placed on the wooden tables, and wooden gold-washing pools occupy the corners. Chinese workers lock the door and wash the gold here each evening. The freezer in the crude kitchen is crammed with Chinese cans and a frozen chicken. The workers’ dormitory is a cramped space compartmentalised using wood, with mosquito nets on the beds. The military police find a hunting rifle under one worker’s bed.

The lives of these Chinese workers are spent in the open air mine 200 metres from the shed. Previously part of the Kakum Forest, it has been stripped bare. 4-5 large excavators are working, excavating a pit the size of a football pitch. Diggers pour the gravel onto a conveyor belt, where it is taken to a chute. A Chinese supervisor monitors three black workers who use hoses to wash it. Mud splashes everywhere and the surrounding sand has become extremely soft – when someone treads on it, their feet sink in immediately. After eight hours of constant washing, around 150 grams of gold has been produced by the evening.

The above description is of a film shot by a Ghanaian journalist who accompanied the military police on the raid. It continues: the military police herd everyone together, check their IDs, fill in forms, search the area, and accuse them of mining gold in Ghana illegally. Someone puts the gun in a miner’s hand for a photo, and the Chinese remain silent. Afterward, the military police put them onto a truck bound for an Immigration service jail in the capital, Accra.

Over the last three years, Ghanaian law enforcement agencies have raided small gold mines operated by Chinese immigrants a number of times. In June 2013, Ghana took action on the largest scale ever, all but toppling the gold mining system the Chinese had
toppling the gold mining system the Chinese had organised. Prior to this, Alhaji AB Inusah Fuseini, the Ghanaian Minister for Lands and Natural Resources, had claimed that illegal gold mining carried out by foreigners was damaging forests and water resources, and severely impacting the life of Ghanaians. He hoped to reveal those who were backing these illegal miners behind the scenes, and punish them severely in accordance with the law.

This attack toppled the enterprise undertaken by these Chinese migrants. In addition to his shed being burned, the 42-year-old mine boss, Su Zhenyu, whose mine was closed down in the police video, lost all of the equipment he had shipped to Ghana from China, which was looted. His machinery was impounded.

Along with a multitude of other miners from Guangxi who were expelled, Su Zhenyu returned to China in June 2013. Five months passed, things quietened down, and he chose to return to Ghana. Su is brave, he was one of the first miners from Guangxi to go to Ghana and mine gold. He is constantly expanding his enterprises in Ghana, and has married a pretty Ghanaian wife to boot.

One night in November 2013, Su Zhenyu, wearing Ghanaian clothes, was driving on the highway to Accra. When the sun set every day, the Chinese miners’ covered trucks had driven back and forth along this road, transporting the gold they had mined that day, but not a shadow of them was in evidence now. After an hour, the car pulled into a wire-fenced compound in the port city of Tema; this is HANSOL Mining, Su’s company. The company sign has been aligned vertically on the wall outside to avoid attracting attention. He turned the lights off, and all was still. “The Ghanaian economy will pay a price for the departure of the Chinese,” Su says, “When the Chinese have all left, there will be no hope for this place.”

“It isn’t quite Mao Zedong’s China”

According to estimates by local Ghanaian officials, as many as 10,000 Chinese gold miners have come to work illegally in Ghana in the last seven years. Ghana is Africa’s second-largest gold producer, and gold has always been the country’s most important mineral resource, even before Europeans arrived in the 15th century. The Europeans called Ghana the Gold Coast. In the past, the Portuguese, Spanish and Swedish have eyed Ghana’s mineral reserves, and now it is the turn of the Chinese.

Most of the gold comes from alluvial deposits washed down the creeks and rivers of the central rainforests, as well as the sandy soil of the coast. The Ghanaians use shovels and their bare hands, panning for gold by the rivers. This crude traditional skill has been given a popular yet inelegant name, along with the gold panners themselves: galamsey. Now, galamsey is reserved for the Chinese gold miners who are seen as destroying forests and rivers. Chinese galamsey has brought a more efficient, rapid method of production. Where it takes Ghanaian miners a number of years to exploit a 25-acre mine, Chinese heavy machinery finishes the job in half a year. The Chinese want to produce high quantities, and pay little heed to delicate work. As soon as production drops, they move on. This has fundamentally changed the rules of the game established by the Ghanaian government to protect local galamsey.

Su Zhenyu is the solemn Chinese chairman of the Ghanaian Chinese Chamber of Commerce. As he relates it, the first Chinese in Ghana were Hong Kongers and Taiwanese, who tended to operate in textiles and catering. In the 1990s, a group of businessmen from Zhejiang province began to bring cheap Made in China products to Ghana. There were a few subsequent conflicts between locals and Chinese peddlers. Ghanaians accused the Chinese of taking away the livelihoods of local people, and the Chinese claimed that they were the victims of envy and were being squeezed out. Over the last seven years, a host of gold miners have rushed into Ghana, bringing advanced equipment, and – so many believe – damaging the environment. Gold mining has also led to a worsening security situation. The 2012 presidential elections saw competition between the ruling National Democratic Congress and the opposition, the New Patriotic Party (NPP). In response to the grievances of the electorate, measures taken by the ruling party to clear out illegal small mines became more serious.

The most substantial action was taken by a special presidential working group in which the immigration, mining, and environmental agencies all participated. They deployed military police on many occasions, closing mines and shutting down equipment on the basis that workers did not have valid identification documents and
were operating illegal mines. Chinese mine workers were sent to the Immigration Service.

Locals at Dunkua Market, where gold miners gather, are hostile towards the Chinese. But China has been the largest investor in Ghana for many years. The two countries signed a loan framework agreement worth US$3 billion in September 2010. President Mahama has visited large-scale Chinese construction projects on a number of occasions, and has praised the economic contribution China makes to Ghana. According to Professor Adams B Bodomo, a Ghanaian who is in charge of the postgraduate African courses offered at the University of Hong Kong, “China has invested a massive amount in the construction of basic facilities in Ghana over the last 10 years, more construction than Britain carried out in Ghana in the last 100 years.” The Ghanaian government has cautiously described its mine-clearing action as targeted at illegal small-scale mining by foreigners and not at the Chinese in particular. But everybody knows that the number of Russians, Filipinos, and Bulgarians all together is not equal to the number of migrants from Shanglin.

Chinese influence in African commerce, society, and culture is increasing constantly. The Chinese have brought substantial capital and surplus labour to Africa. This is bound to result in some losses for locals who did well previously, and this will naturally arouse some resentment. Where China and Africa were previously brothers in poverty, China has now become Africa’s teacher. China helped to construct Ghana’s National Theatre, the headquarters of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Security, as well as the China-Ghana Friendship Hospital, to which a medical team from Guangdong was dispatched. Previous aid was clearly inspired by ideological factors; now China’s strategy of ‘going out’ has increasingly pursued balanced economic gains. Africans are ambivalent. To African countries, China is not quite what it was in the era of Chairman Mao.

The Chinese have changed the rules of the game

The scent of gold pervades the air of Tema, where Su Zhenyu lives. By the sides of the red brick roads characteristic of Tema, the Chinese signs of Tema International Grand Hotel, Kinmen KTV, and Fengshou Farm Market can be seen, many of them Chinese businesses, and flourishing due to gold mining. The black doorman at the nightclub is extra polite to Chinese guests, using unaccented Mandarin to greet each with ‘boss.’ Gold mine owners gather to give toasts, and exchange the day’s news. Afterward, they go to the restaurant on the second floor where they continue to drink tea and smoke cigarettes, reaching agreements between puffs to be carried out on the next day. The coming of the Chinese has brought new opportunities; a kind of Wild West boom has appeared across the whole city.

Seven years ago, Su Zhenyu and three compatriots from Shanglin signed an agreement to mine gold together in Ghana. It brought a wave of gold prospectors from Shanglin to China. In 2010, people from Shanglin decided to start importing heavy excavators, which, together with the gravel-pumping technology they developed, increased gold-mining efficiency by a factor of 10 at a stroke. At first, they excavated 15 grams of gold per day; an amount which later rose to 150 grams. A crowd of people from Shanglin came to Ghana on tourist visas, and straight away came to work in their compatriots’ mines. In the wake of the increase in gold prices at the time, Su Zhenyu earned money, founded a company, and augmented his equipment. He purchased 800 square kilometres of land,
and signed an agreement with people from Shanglin. Prospectors would work on his land, and pay 7,000 Ghanaian Cedis in land management and service fees, and 10% in royalties on profits earned. The company helps to arrange work visas and maintains a relationship with the Ghanaian government, and provides a guarantee of normal operations to shareholders.

The Chinese community has gradually expanded. There is a Shanglin Hotel in Kumasi, where gold prospectors gather. The owner, Monica, is also from Shanglin, and studied at a university in Beijing. Prices have increased in areas where people from Shanglin gather, stimulating consumption, and Ghanaians who work with the Chinese have benefitted and so are welcoming. But opposing voices have also become stronger. Mark Obeng, a scholar at Ghana University who studies Sino-African trade tells me, “Have you noticed? There’s no Chinatown in Ghana. This is extremely rare in overseas Chinese communities. As there have been several conflicts between Chinese and Ghanaian businessmen over sales territory, the Chinatown arranged by the Chinese came to nothing.” As the first African country to become independent, Ghana seems to have a subconscious scrutiny of outside influence.

The Ghanaian economy has achieved startling development over the last few years. GDP growth reached 14.9% in 2011. High scaffolding can be seen all over the bustling capital city, Accra. Accra Mall, the largest supermarket in west Africa, sits by the dust-blown highway. While it was constructed with South African capital, many of the goods on its shelves come from China.

After independence, Ghana’s founding president, Kwame Nkrumah, led his country in a ‘turn to the left,’ nationalizing the gold mines. As a result of economic mismanagement and autocracy, Nkrumah’s government was toppled in 1966. At the time, he was visiting Beijing. After this, the government of Ghana went through several shifts, then a relatively stable two-party system formed, and Ghana’s economy gradually stabilized and improved. Ghana promulgated the Mining Law, which began to privatise the gold mining industry, in July 1986. A management agency for small-scale mining, which authorises individuals to operate small gold mines, was established in 1989.

The Ghana Minerals Commission is situated in a European-style garden in the middle of Accra. This commission is empowered to examine and approve mining rights. When I was interviewing the assistant manager of the small-scale gold mining department, Tetteh, he told me that the intention of Ghanaian laws which permit individuals to operate small mines was to protect the livelihoods of the native traditional galamsey. The entry of foreigners into this sector changed the original intention of Ghana to protect traditional small-scale mining.

Ghanaian mining concessions are divided into large and small concessions, and foreign investors must raise a certain amount of capital to be allowed to open a mine; smaller concessions of less than 25 acres can only be given to Ghanaians. The law only permits foreigners to provide advisory services, funding and equipment to small-scale mines, not to directly engage in mining. Afterwards the Chinese established companies providing services to small mines, yet it was actually still the Chinese themselves who were doing the mining. The Ghanaian government discovered that foreigners were exploiting this policy, and so amended the law: after 2012, foreigners were not even permitted to provide services to mines.

Ghanaian land is privately-owned yet mines are nationalised; the laws stipulate that opening a small-scale mine requires that a Ghanaian go to the Minerals Commission to apply for a license, and obtain environmental assessment certification. There are instances of landowners claiming to own mines and completing the procedures, having signed contracts with Chinese miners. There are also Chinese miners who find tribal chieftains and landowners, give them a large sum of money, and move machinery into the forest and begin mining. Having taken the money, the chieftain or landowner moves farmers off the land. Such situations have become more serious and more common in the last few years.

The power of tribal chiefs decreased in the Nkrumah era, but their influence remains considerable; it is said that they are the guardians of the spirits and traditions, and may not participate in commercial activity, although many chieftains have taken part in the illegal businesses operated by Chinese miners. To this day, not a single tribal chieftain has been charged in connection with such deals. The law enforcement agencies fish for money from these small-scale mines, leaving without taking action after receiving discreet bribes.

Many Ghanaians have not faced up to the corruption and ineffectiveness of their own country, and have a parochial stance. They believe that the Chinese are plundering Ghana’s most valuable resources. This feeling of resistance manifests itself in constant confiscation of Chinese mines, and also appears in the competition between Ghana’s two political parties.

I asked Tetteh, an assistant manager at the Minerals...
AS THEY INVEST ALL OF THEIR MONEY IN NEW EQUIPMENT, MIGRANTS FROM SHANGLIN WHO COME TO AFRICA ARE LATER BURDENED WITH LARGE DEBTS NO MATTER HOW MUCH MONEY THEY EARN THERE.

Inspectorate Commission’s department of small gold mining, why the first mine to be confiscated was the AKONTA mine, owned by the HANSOL Mining Company. Everybody knew that Su Zhenyu had hired a Ghanaian, Bernard, to serve as CEO. Bernard was a member of the opposition party, the NPP, and HANSOL Mining had been charged with providing the opposition with illicit funding. Was there political motive to the attack on this particular company?

He gave a short, clear answer: “No.” The Minerals Inspectorate Commission’s legal advisor, Afeku, added from the side that “it’s mainly because the number of foreign-operated gold mines is increasing, and has already gotten out of control.”

The Minerals Inspectorate Commission’s public relations officer, Abraham, emphasises that “the development of Ghana’s economy cannot be established on illegal industry. Small-scale mining degrades public security and exacerbates problems with the exploitation of labour; many students give their studies up to work in the mines, and agricultural production has been seriously affected; the amount of chemicals used to purify river water has already increased to four times the previous amount.”

“Foreigners have brought technology to Ghana, but large-scale machinery also destroys the forest exceptionally quickly.” Before the interview ends, Tetteh says with emotion: “Go and take a look at the water of the Pra River, where we’ve allowed mining, and your heart will break too!”

Gold prospectors: Beset from within and without

At the Ghanaian Immigration Service, Palmdeti, who is in charge of public relations, says that “between the end of May and the beginning of June 2013, we deported over 600 Chinese migrants, and at least 1,500 to 2,000 left of their own free will. Many of them had participated in illegal mining.” The figure provided by staff at the Chinese embassy is higher: 5,000-6,000 Chinese citizens returned to China, and around 1,000 prospectors remain in Ghana at present.

Palmdeti is a big, mild fellow. He says that the ordinary Ghanaian’s view of Chinese people is that they destroy the environment when they come here. As he sees it, there is a well-oiled machine behind the influx of Chinese migrants. “Many of the Chinese have applied for a visa to go to Libya, they leave the airport with the help of locals when they’re transferring in Ghana, and have gone straight to the gold mines.”

There were some Chinese workers whose arrival was never recorded by the Immigration Service, yet they were provided with work visas. This implicated some Ghanaian officials. Four high-ranking Ghanaian immigration officials were subsequently fired or resigned; they were charged with taking bribes to approve work visas for migrants entering the country illegally. One of them was a bureau vice-head, and another two were the highest ranking officers in their regions. As Palmdeti says, “The officials who were dismissed took their posts up under the last government. Most people do their jobs honestly, corruption is currently at a manageable level.”

Most of the prospectors come from the same area: Shanglin county, Guangxi province. I went to Shanglin in June 2013. Shanglin is one of China’s poorest counties, and people there depend on gold mining to earn a living. Gold mining has brought environmental problems, and has been banned by the Chinese government. The surplus labour of Shanglin has moved to the eastern coastal cities to work as migrant labour; for many, going to Africa to mine gold means a return to their original profession. They’ve usually never heard of Ghana before they depart China, and they pay intermediaries large sums and borrow money to buy heavy excavation equipment, load them into containers, and ship them to Africa. As they invest all of their money in new equipment, migrants from Shanglin who come to Africa are later burdened with large debts no matter how much money they earn there.

The Ghanaian press depicts Su Zhenyu as a snake who buys and sells his own compatriots; they’ve discovered that virtually every Chinese migrant in Ghana has Su’s phone number. Su established the Ghana-China Mining Association in 2012, but miners who have been expelled claim that the Association only takes protection money and does not provide the promised protection. Liu Shujun, the Chinese Ambassador, says that it is illegal for foreigners in Ghana to mine gold, and so an association based on an illegal activity cannot be recognized.
Su Zhenyu was beset from both within and without simultaneously.

Su believes that he and other Chinese have been demonised: “Gold mines and individuals from Shanglin have come to Ghana to co-operate with Ghanaians; we have put money in people's pockets, while the international mining companies put money in the government's pockets. Now it is time to reshuffle the deck. To be blunt, the Chinese have been sacrificed.” According to the analysis of Wu Yuan, a researcher at the African Research Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, in the past, the law was not strictly enforced in Ghana, but now stricter laws are being enforced. What's more, many Chinese mines use guns to defend themselves, giving rise to conflict, and the ruling party is expected to strictly clear out illegal mines.

The misfortune of the people of Shanglin cannot but cast a shadow between Ghana and the Chinese. Su Yuehua, President of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, says that China once assisted many countries in Africa, and is now investing in large projects. Many ordinary Ghanaians don't see this, but only come into contact with illegal gold miners every day. Added to the fact that Ghanaians are very receptive to the views of Western media, this makes it very easy for negative feelings toward China to grow.

Su Yuehua believes that “there is nothing wrong with China's strategy of 'going out' generally, but whether it can actually bring African countries new opportunities for development should be considered. China is currently active in Africa in large-scale resource projects, and can quickly strike deals in this area. But the beneficiaries of such projects may amount only to Chinese companies and a small number of Ghanaians. There are many small Chinese enterprises and individuals in Africa who live together with Africans. Investing in large projects wins battles but loses the war, while investing in 100 small enterprises is like supporting 100 private ambassadors, if they are encouraged to respect the law. There could perhaps be more opportunities for China to succeed.”

The story of Xu Qinwei, a Chinese resident of Accra, is typical. After the China-Ghana Friendship Hospital was built, it was turned over to Ghana, but the hospital suffered from operational problems, and the Ghanaians went back and asked the Chinese to solve them – aid has not yielded the most ideal results. Xu Qinwei, who ran a hospital in Shandong province, contacted the China-Africa Development Fund, hoping to invest in equity and purchase the hospital and improve its operations.

The China-Africa Development Fund was originally very interested in this combination of investment and aid, and both sides did a great deal of preliminary work. However, after Xu Qinwei invested millions in equipment and came to Ghana, the plan stalled. To this day, Xu is working in a hospital office in Accra.

The China-African Development Fund has invested in three projects in Ghana. US$100 million in a tidal power plant in Tema, US$33 million by Hainan Airlines to establish two internal flight routes, and US$150 million to establish a steel pipe mill. According to Xu, “The founding aim of the China-Africa Development Fund was to support small-to-medium enterprises ‘going out,’ but it has ultimately supported large-scale resource projects. [This is] because the returns can be seen more quickly.”

“‐They aren’t grateful to us in the least”

Su Zhenyu engaged a team of lawyers, and filed suit at the Ghanaian Supreme Court, suing the law enforcement agencies for the losses incurred by his company due to the mine clearance on 3 June 2013. Part of the video shot by the reporter showing the military police setting fire to the shed became important evidence. In August 2013, the court found that HANSOL Mining had been in possession of a legal license, and that the military police was not permitted to enter the company's areas of operation, but also recognised that the action they took had been authorised by the government. They eventually awarded HANSOL Mining 1,000 Cedis in compensation. This was not enough even to cover legal expenses.

Six months later, many people from Shanglin have already opened new fronts in Cameroon and Mali. A lot of heavy gold mining equipment has been shipped out of Ghana. There are also some dispossessed mine bosses who have decided to recover their losses, and are continuing to operate discreetly in Ghana. In my last few days in Ghana, I went to a gold mine where Chinese prospectors were continuing to operate.

This mine is a joint venture between the boss, Chen from Hunan province, and a few Shanglinese. At three in the afternoon, a covered truck drives out on the highway from Kumasi to Dunkwa. As they pass a highway checkpoint, a soldier carrying a rifle flags the truck down. He is wearing yellow earth-coloured camouflage and combat boots, and gazes at the four people in the vehicle: aside from the driver, who is Ghanaian, they are all Chinese. “Your ID,” he says quietly.

I pull form my pocket a sweat-drenched visitor's
visa, which I obtained from the National Ministry of Information and Media Relations in Accra. I put on a stern expression and say “the Ghanaian government has permitted me to visit your country.” The young soldier glances at the visitor’s visa, tentatively reads my name, and lets us go with a wave of his hand.

Ms Zhou, boss Chen’s aunt, who is responsible for preparing food for the workers and providing them with the goods they need, is sitting in the back of the truck. She says that “we were lucky today, they didn’t ask for a bribe.” She can only speak a little English, and in order to make up for lost time, she tells the driver to “go fast!” The truck turns from the highway onto a narrow mountain road, and after passing a Ghanaian woman carrying a heavy load on her head, we arrive at a village near Obuasi. She points at the villagers surrounding a well and says, “We’ve already repaired three wells for this village, and the road, but they seized one of our machines, just wanting to get money from us. They don’t seem at all grateful to us.” At around half past five, when we arrive, the last washing procedure of the day is underway in the mine’s crude shed. The workers from Shanglin carefully extract the gold dust from the muddy pool. Spread out in the iron dustpan, all of the Chinese workers gather around. Someone says, “I see gold at this time every day, and feel that any amount of risk is worth it.”

The gold dust is drying atop the gas stove. Placed on the scale, it reads “144 grams.” According to calculations, if a piece of land this size produces 40 grams of gold a day, it recovers its operating costs. The mine boss’ girlfriend pours the gold dust onto a sheet of white paper, folds it over, and tightens it with an elastic band. The gold will be hidden somewhere unknown to outsiders, smelted into gold bars when a certain amount has been accumulated, then sold to an Indian in Kumasi. The dollars for which the gold is exchanged will be remitted to China through a traditional bank operated by people from Henan and Zhejiang provinces in three to four days.

After the washing of the gold dust has been completed, a few black labourers suddenly intrude into the corrugated-steel-ringed compound. The boss from Shanglin, Mr Tang, shouts and rushes out, ordering them to leave the compound immediately. The rule that only Chinese are permitted to be present at the last stage of washing is strictly observed. The black workers explain that they are only looking for some lost belongings in the yard, and the confrontation is resolved.

At eight in the evening, the truck returns to Kumasi from the mine. After a rough day, the energetic Ms Zhou drifts off to sleep in the back. After passing through a small, winding, road covered by Japanese banana trees, a truck with lights on and three black occupants stops right ahead. The driver has clearly slowed the truck, seemingly wishing to talk to our driver. Boss Chen, sitting in the front passenger seat, becomes very tense. He uses English to give the driver an order: “Don’t stop! Go, quickly!”

With us scared witless, the truck is lost in the black of the night like a bird startled from the trees.

Later he says that on evenings when gold is excavated, bandits armed with guns often commit robbery on the roads Chinese gold miners must use, and that more than a few Chinese have fallen victim to them.
BRIDE AND PREJUDICE: AFRO-CHINESE MARRIAGES IN GUANGZHOU

By Jenni Marsh

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Eman Okonkwo’s foot-tapping at the altar is not a sign of nerves. The groom’s palms aren’t sweaty, there are no pre-wedding jitters and certainly no second thoughts. Today he is realising a dream imagined by countless African merchants in Guangzhou: he is marrying a Chinese bride.

Seven days earlier, Jennifer Tsang’s family was oblivious to their daughter’s romance. Like many local women dating African men, the curvaceous trader from Foshan, who is in her late 20s — that dreaded ‘leftover woman’ age — had feared her parents would be racially prejudiced.

Today, though — having tentatively given their blessing — they snuck into the underground Royal Victory Church in Guangzhou, looking over their shoulders for police as they entered the downtown tower block. Non-state-sanctioned religious events like this are illegal on the mainland.

Okonkwo, 42, doesn’t have a single relative at the rambunctious Pentecostal ceremony, but is nevertheless delighted.

“Today is so special,” beams the Nigerian, “because I have married a Chinese girl. And that makes me half-African, half-Chinese.”

In Guangzhou, weddings like this take place every day. There are no official figures on Afro-Chinese marriages but visit any trading warehouse in the city and you will see scores of mixed-race couples running wholesale shops, their coffee-coloured, hair-braided children racing through the corridors.

While Okonkwo’s dream of becoming Chinese through matrimony is futile — the Guangzhou Public Security Bureau (PSB) denies African husbands any more rights than a tourist — his children, should he have any and they be registered under Tsang’s name, will possess a hukou residency permit and full Chinese citizenship.

The relationship with Africa that China has so
aggressively courted for economic gain – 2012 saw a record US$198 billion of trade between them – is producing an unexpected return: the mainland’s first mixed-race generation with blood from a distant continent and the right to be Chinese.

**Chocolate city**

‘Chocolate City’ or ‘Little Africa’, as it has been dubbed by the Chinese press, is a district of Guangzhou that is home to between 20,000 and 200,000 mostly male, African migrants (calculations vary wildly due to the itinerant nature of many traders and the thousands who overstay their visas).

Africans began pouring into China after the collapse of the Asian Tigers in 1997 prompted them to abandon outposts in Thailand and Indonesia. By exporting cheap Chinese goods back home, traders made a killing, and word spread fast. Guangzhou became a promised land.

It is easy to believe that every African nation is represented here, with the Nigerian, Malian and Guinean communities the most populous. But Little Africa is a misnomer; in the bustling 7 km stretch from Sanyuanli to Baiyun, in northern Guangzhou, myriad ethnicities co-exist.

Uygurs serve freshly baked Xinjiang bread to Angolan women balancing shopping on their heads while Somalis in flowing Muslim robes haggle over mobile phones before exchanging currency with Malians in leather jackets, who buy lunch from Turks sizzling tilapia on street grills, and then order beer from the Korean waitress in the Africa Bar. Tucked away above a shop-lined trading corridor, the bar serves food that reminds Africans of home – egusi soup, jollof rice, fried chicken.

Whereas Chungking Mansions conceals Hong Kong’s low-end trading community, in dilapidated Dengfeng village – Little Africa’s central thoroughfare – the merchants, supplied by Chinese wholesalers, are highly visible. And it’s in this melee of trade where most Afro-Chinese romances blossom.

**Success comes with a Chinese wife**

Amadou Issa came to China in 2004. We meet in Lounge Coffee, a hangout popular with African men who like a cigarette with their croissant, while a Celine Dion CD plays in the background. Through the nicotine haze, the 34-year-old from Niger – rated by the United Nations as one of the world’s least developed nations – tells me he arrived at Baiyun International Airport with US$300, simply wanting “to survive”.

Today, he owns a five million yuan (HK$6.3 million) flat in Zhujiang New Town, Guangzhou’s smartest district, drives a car worth US$64,000 and speaks Mandarin. Issa ships 50 to 200 containers home per year full of construction materials, because “they’re the most lucrative”, and makes an average US$2,000 on each container.

A friend, Yusuf Sampto, a trader with three shops in West Africa’s Burkina Faso, pulls up a chair. They excitedly describe stuffing suitcases with “literally millions” of US dollars to move their profits back to China once the goods have sold (they declare the cash at customs, they say). African banks can’t be trusted, they explain, and it’s impossible for a migrant to open a current account in the mainland.

Like most of Guangzhou’s successful traders, Issa has a Chinese wife. “She used to work for a company I ordered from, and we became friends,” he says. “We had a Chinese wedding and a Muslim wedding. Her name was Xie Miemie but I renamed her Zena.”

Zena is from Hainan Island and Issa was the first African man her family had ever seen. “Initially, they were unsure about me, but now, when I’m not there, they ask my wife, ‘Where is your import husband?’” Issa chuckles.

Youssou Ousagna also gets along well with his in-laws. The retired footballer moved from Senegal to Sichuan province in 2005, having been scouted by Chengdu Tiancheng FC. In 2007, after an injury had ended his playing career, Ousagna moved to Guangzhou, where he met his Hangzhou-born wife, she worked at the pharmacy from which he picked up medicine for ongoing football injuries.

Her parents are both doctors, her sister is a surgeon and her brother a policeman in Guangzhou. This middle-class family have welcomed their Muslim son-in-law.

“With most Chinese, communication is the problem,”
Ousagna says, “I speak Mandarin, so we understood each other. No problem.”

“Marrying a black person is marrying down”

Outside Little Africa, however, racism remains deep-seated, says Gordon Matthews, a professor of anthropology at the Chinese University of Hong Kong who is researching low-end globalisation in Guangzhou.

“I know three or four relationships where the couple had expected it to lead to marriage, but as soon as the Chinese family met the African boyfriend, they had to end it,” he says. “Marrying a black person is still marrying down in China.”

Racial prejudice on the mainland hit the headlines in 2009, when Lou Jing, an Afro-Chinese singer, then 20, appeared on an American Idol imitation television show, sparking controversy and drawing racial slurs online.

“How can a mixed-race contestant become a Chinese idol?” bloggers demanded.

Chinese prejudice against Africans is normally based on three aspects: traditional aesthetic values, an ignorance of African culture and society, and the language barrier.

Furthermore, until the 1970s, foreigners were not permitted to live in the mainland, let alone marry a Chinese. When a child is born, the parents must register its ethnicity with the authorities: of the 56 boxes they can tick, ‘mixed-race’ is not an option.

But there are factors other than racism that might lead a family to reject a mixed marriage.

Linessa Lin Dan, a PhD student at the Chinese University of Hong Kong researching Afro-Chinese relations in Guangzhou, says many African men who propose already have wives in their home countries, Muslims are permitted by their religion to take multiple spouses. Furthermore, Lin has heard tales of husbands returning to Nigeria on a business trip, leaving a mobile-phone number that doesn’t connect and disappearing.

“The Chinese wife is left with their children, and shamed for marrying a hei gui [derogatory word for black person, literally ‘black ghost’],” says Lin.

Useful Chinese partners

Generally, though, the African bachelors in Guangzhou are not desperate asylum seekers: they are highly eligible businessmen. Like Ousagna and Issa, they often own a car, have a stable income and speak Mandarin. Forty percent of African migrants surveyed in Guangzhou for the book Africans in China (2012), by former University of Hong Kong professor Adams Bodomo, had received tertiary education, some even held a PhD.

As one Congolese merchant tells Post Magazine, “To start a business in China you have to be quite well-to-do. In the early days, the air ticket alone cost US$2,000.”

Despite their eligibility, most African grooms in Guangzhou marry Chinese economic migrants whose disapproving families reside far from the city. In business terms, it is the ideal merger, says Lin, who believes most Afro-Chinese marriages are a cynical play for better business.

“Opening a shop is very difficult for foreigners,” she says. “You need a Chinese passport or the landlord will ask for a bribe. A Chinese wife can speak to suppliers. It’s useful to have a Chinese partner.

“Many Chinese women want to marry Africans because they are from poor rural areas, often Hunan or Hubei provinces. Marrying a foreigner is a way to upgrade their social status, because the Africans have money.”

Instead of taking a factory job, a Chinese woman who marries an African man often becomes head of his wholesale shop, should he open one, and a key player in his export business.

Pat Chukwuonye Chike, a garment trader by day and Nigerian hip-hop artist known as Dibaocha Sky by night, has a Chinese wife who doubles as a business partner. But, he says, if African men could legally work in China, many might not take a local wife.

“That is my sacrifice,” says the married father of two. “My wife cannot cook. My mother-in-law helps look after the children, and she is poisoning them against Africa. She's an old woman, she knows the game she's playing. There is crisis everywhere – terrorists were in Guangzhou last week – it is a sin to make my children scared of Nigeria.”

Africans in Guangzhou fall into two groups: those with valid documentation and those whose visas have expired. For those who have overstayed, a Chinese wife is more than a business partner; she is key to survival.

Last August, a major police bust on an African-led drug ring turned life into a daily fight against deportation for overstayers. From dusk till dawn, police checked passports in Guangyuan Xi Lu, the Nigerian annex of Little Africa, where most of the city’s overstayers can be found.

“When Africans land at Baiyun Airport many throw away their passports,” Lin says. “They only get seven- to 30-day visas [less than most other Africans] – it’s not enough time to make their fortunes.”
“A lot of people are having children now and we need to know their future.”

Overstayers face a 12,000 yuan fine and must pay for their 6,000 yuan air ticket out of the country. Those with Chinese wives went underground while their spouses manned their businesses. “During this period, Nigerians with Chinese wives survived better,” says Lin.

While the crackdown proved a Chinese wife’s worth, the loyalty displayed points to genuine devotion in Afro-Chinese romances.

Pastor IG, of the Royal Victory Church, has a Chinese wife, and children. One Sunday I ask him, “Is it love or business?”

The Nigerian sighs. He feels “slighted” by repeated assumptions his eight-year marriage is economically motivated. He met Winnie, a native of Guangdong province, at church and the pair are united in their evangelic mission (“God knows it’s China’s time,” he says). Winnie, 34, is a pastor at the church’s 100-worshipper-strong Chinese arm, while he leads the larger African congregation. Their tactile body language speaks volumes about their union.

Michelle Zhang Nan, 35, doesn’t fit the profile of a trader’s wife, either. When we meet at McDonald’s, she is dressed in an expensive A-line dress and kitten heels. Her three-year-old son, Calvin, trails behind as she carries a tray of Big Macs and milkshakes.

A university graduate whose parents are government officials, Zhang lives in Guangzhou but has a prized Beijing hukou and owns a phone-battery retail business. “I liked the way he did business,” she says, of falling in love with her South African husband. “If I was married to a Chinese man, I could not be a strong woman like I am today. My husband is 11 years older and he teaches me.”

She notes that a Chinese man would benefit equally from taking an African wife, but that is unheard of in Guangzhou. As one bootylicious Liberian hairdresser, who works on the third floor of a tower block, says, “Chinese men aren’t manly, they aren’t sexual to us.” (East African prostitutes working in Little Africa, however, report that 50% of their clients are Chinese men who “want to try it”, according to Matthews.)

**Hostile immigration policies**

But a Chinese wife cannot solve an African migrant’s biggest problem: his visa. Happy families can be swiftly torn apart if the PSB denies a continuation on an African husband’s temporary documents. The central government pointedly lacks an immigration department, meaning there is no framework for the assimilation of newlyweds such as Okonkwo.

Policy differs from province to province and, compared with those in other Chinese cities, the Guangdong authorities are notorious for their hostile and inconsistent attitude to African migrants.

Throughout the two months I conducted interviews, African husbands reported getting a variety of visas. Nigerian businessman Tony Ekkai, who has two Afro-Chinese children, has a representative office of his Hong Kong-registered business in Guangzhou, and therefore is entitled to a coveted one-year, multiple-entry business visa. His Nigerian friend Tony Michael, also married to a Chinese woman, with a two-month-old son, is despondently stuck on three-month visas. Six-month, single-entry visas are all Zhang’s husband has seen.

Many, like Ousagna, return to their wives’ provinces to renew their visas, to evade the capricious Guangzhou authorities. Others, such as Guinean trader Cellou, who has a one-year residence pass, say their country’s good political relationship with Beijing helps their visa applications. Guinea was the first sub-Saharan country to forge diplomatic ties with China, and Cellou, who studied business at the International Islamic University Malaysia, spots the glaring double standard: “If my [Chinese] wife stays in Guinea she can get a Guinea passport.”

African states – home to millions of Chinese, also often undocumented – are watching closely to see how their citizens are treated on mainland soil. After a 2012 crackdown in Beijing on African migrants, Nigerian immigration authorities immediately retaliated, arresting 45 Chinese traders in the northern city of Kano.

With so much at stake for Sino-African relations, Beijing is playing a cautious game.
Chinese government troubled by Africans

Lan Shanshan, a research assistant professor at Hong Kong Baptist University, claims there is a media edict on the mainland to report favourably on Africans in China, hence the state-owned newspaper Guangming Daily’s three-part special titled “Friends From Africa, How are You Doing in Guangzhou?”, in 2012.

But a WikiLeaks cable from 2008 revealed that the central government is troubled by the phenomenon, and quietly funded covert research into Africans in Guangzhou, specifically their impact on crime, underground religion and missed tax revenue. The US diplomat who wrote the cable to Washington was not privy to the findings.

In 2011, the government dropped its poker face with the ground-breaking Guangdong Act, which offered rewards to Chinese who snitched on overstayers; made it illegal for employers, hoteliers or educational institutes to serve illegal migrants, and insisted they report all cases to the PSB or face a 10,000 yuan fine; and expanded police powers so that any officer, not just members of the foreign affairs department, could stop foreigners to verify passports.

Even those with valid visas were rattled. A Ugandan told Lan, “A visa is not a 100% guarantee here. When police stop you, if you do not look like a pleasant person to them, they may draw the line on your visa and cancel it. They say, ‘China gives, China takes.’”

In 2010 Bodomo predicted that in 100 years’ time “an African-Chinese ethnic minority group could be demanding self-identity and full citizenship rights in the heart of Guangzhou”. But that’s already happening.

Ojukwu Emmanuel, 42, is the man spearheading this campaign. A political heavyweight in Guangzhou, he is the elected head of the Nigerian community (each African nation has an informal community representative) and also goes by the ostentatious title of President of Africa in China.

Emmanuel came to Guangzhou in 1997. He has a Chinese wife, a four-year-old son and, in 2012, he formed the Nigerian-Chinese Family Forum, comprising 200 mixed-race couples and their offspring. His team put together a dossier outlining the contributions to society made by Nigerians and presented it to the PSB, demanding longer and more lenient visas for those with families.

“A lot of people are having children now and we need to know their future,” he says.

Emmy Marc-Anthony, Emmanuel’s assistant and a former TV actor in Nigeria, says, “We are contributing to the economy, we are bringing money from our home countries and investing here, spending money, and give great jobs to local Chinese.”

The PSB listened to the appeal; perhaps it was fearful of unrest. In 2009, 200 Africans rioted after a Nigerian jumped to his death from a building to escape a passport check. That was the first time in many decades that foreigners had protested en masse in the mainland.

Marc-Anthony now has a three-year resident visa. “Very soon I hope they will give us ID cards,” he says.

But for those not associated with the Nigerian-Chinese Family Forum, which is the vast majority of Africans in Guangzhou, things aren’t getting easier. Last year, the central government passed the draconian Exit-Entry Administration Law.

Africans who were hoping this highly anticipated law would open up China in terms of immigration and give husbands access to permanent resident status were sorely disappointed.

“In reality, rather than changing the rules of the game, the law marked a nationwide change in attitude,” says Robert Castillo, a PhD student in cultural studies at Lingnan University. “The Ministry of Public Security, it seems, is serious about controlling the presence of foreigners in the country.”

Before, Africans could renew their visas by crossing the border into Hong Kong or Macau; now they must return to their home nations to reapply.

“With such instability, Africans are forced to be living and renting in China but having savings and investments – i.e. housing – in Africa,” says Castillo. “The future of families with one foreign parent is precarious.”

Pastor Daniel Michael-Mbawike, who founded the Royal Victory Church after leaving Nigeria in 1994, was banned from the mainland for proselytising to the
Chinese. Now heading the church from Hong Kong, he has seen families torn apart by the new law.

“The authorities are refusing or cancelling visas for no reason,” he says, “Brother Abu’s visa was suddenly cancelled. He has a wife and two kids but had to go back to Nigeria. Another two girls got engaged to Africans but the men are stuck in Nigeria and trying to get back for their wedding.

“I’ve heard African men saying if the economy slows down they will have to leave, even if their families do not follow.”

Given such inhospitable conditions, 95% of the Africans I interview say they want to leave, though no-one has a time frame for their departure.

To add insult to injury, while Africans are denied Chinese citizenship, they are still subject to the one-child policy.

IG and Winnie have three children, Peace, aged eight, Joshua, six, and nine month-old Jeremia. “After the second child they asked us to pay 30,000 yuan even though I’m a foreigner,” he says, with a what-can-you-do shrug.

At the time, the couple fought bitterly over whether or not to oblige.

The two eldest children are registered under their mother’s name and so have Chinese passports and hukou; Jeremia is tagged onto his father’s one-year visa. Unless the family can find another 30,000 yuan or the situation changes, he will not be able to freely attend local schools, will have less access to medical services and, come his 18th birthday, will enter the same visa quagmire his father has waded through for years.

But IG looks on the bright side. “Maybe one day he will become a Chinese Obama,” he laughs.

Zhang also dreams big for Calvin. “After middle school he will go to Beijing, where my hukou is, because it will be better for his college application,” she says. “I hope he studies hard and gets a very good job in Beijing.”

As Calvin rampages through McDonald’s, pulling trays off tables and trying to urinate into a plant pot, I hope he can live up to his mother’s expectations.

**Plans to return to Africa**

At the Huiling Integrated Kindergarten in Baiyun, Amina Magasaga arrives for lessons. The five-year-old, who has a Chinese mother and Malian father, loves Hello Kitty, speaks perfect Putonghua and is fluent in English.

Amina is not unusual at Huiling; her class of 30 includes Uygur Muslims, Chinese, children of African migrants and two other Afro-Chinese students.

Her teacher, Miss Ariel, herself a migrant from Harbin, says there have never been any Lou Jing-esque racist incidents at the kindergarten; these children have a new, multi-ethnic concept of being Chinese. But while integration at kindergarten level seems successful, the challenges facing Amina’s parents means this little girl’s future may not be in China.

As labour costs in China rise – making goods more expensive to export – and hostility to foreigners intensifies, dinnertime debates over whether to relocate to Africa are on the rise. It’s a decision that many couples have already taken. Ariel reports that in 2009, there were 27 African children in the kindergarten, more than a third of the total student population. Today that proportion has shrunk to about a sixth.

“Sadly, I’ve heard African men saying if the economy slows down, and business goes bad, they will have to leave, even if their families do not follow them,” says Castillo. “People without [options in China] are worried about the prospects of being forced to abandon their families.”

Undeniably, most African fathers, once they become rich, want to return home. But intractable problems in their birth nations – the terror wrought by Boko Haram in Nigeria, al-Shabab in Kenya, recurring droughts in Burkina Faso – mean that, for many, Africa will still have to wait. What their wives do when that time comes is another matter.

Guangzhou’s Afro-Chinese children, a living legacy of an economic dream, are still maturing: few are more than 10 years old. But when Amina’s generation reaches adulthood, they, too, will have to decide, just like their fathers before them, where their land of opportunity lies.
On the corner of a bumpy, red-soil road in the rural town of Iganga in eastern Uganda, there lies a small store. A handful of people mill around the entrance in the glaring sun, waiting for their turn to enter. They are the main source of activity on this placid street, but their patient presence barely betrays the hubbub within.

Inside, almost a dozen people sit crammed on makeshift benches around two edges of the stifling room. Most of the remaining space is taken up by a shop counter, behind which are shelves piled high with vibrantly-coloured health products covered in Chinese characters.

A couple of customers compete with a baby wailing as they read out lists of products to the shop attendants who pick them off the shelves. Every now and then, the door in the corner opens. Someone steps out, usually holding a piece of paper, and the person sitting closest steps in. Beyond that doorway is an even smaller room, windowless and illuminated by a single light. As I peer in, three people are undergoing diagnostic tests, a woman is standing on a machine that hums loudly as it vibrates, and a few more patients are waiting slumped along the wall.

Wasswa Zziwa Edrisa – or ‘Doctor Wasswa’ as he is known here – stands in the centre wearing a fresh, chequered shirt on his back and an unwavering grin on his face. With the easy charm of a seasoned salesman and the swaggering self-assurance of Uganda’s national bird and symbol, the crested crane, Wasswa welcomes me in.

“I will show you how we help so many people,” he says, beaming. “Let me show you the machines.”

One machine for all illnesses

“This is one of the scanners,” he explains, pointing to a piece of kit that looks a bit like a 1970s radio. “It shows everything. We can see if you have diabetes, kidney deficiencies, liver problems, eye problems. Everything.”

Wasswa explains that the test works using a traditional Chinese understanding of the body whereby different points of the hand relate to different internal organs. We watch as an attendant prods a patient’s left palm with a metal tip, making a little meter light up. When the light goes green, he explains, it means that part of the body is fine, but if it goes orange it indicates a problem.

Next Wasswa points me to the corner where a woman is standing on a small machine and holding onto a pair of handlebars to which she is harnessed. Her whole body blurs in the dim light as the platform beneath her vibrates rapidly, its droning buzz filling the room.
Similar machines can be found in many gyms these days and are meant to help tone muscle, but the uses Wasswa presents are quite different.

“This is a blood circulation massager,” he announces. “You see how she sweats. It opens the vessels and deals with paralysis. It helps people with stroke.”

Wasswa then shows me another diagnostics machine, this one connected to a laptop. As the patient holds on to an appliance plugged into the computer, pictures of different organs flash up on the screen for a few seconds each as a dial next to it oscillates erratically. After a minute, a one-page document pops up, listing how well his organs are functioning.

Suspect diagnoses

In the airless room, Wasswa runs through a few more devices – a face pain remover, a blood pressure reducer, a necklace that removes radiation – before squeezing past bodies and chairs to get back to the first patient we met. By now his diagnostic test is complete. He tells me that he came to the store because of some mild pain around his mouth, but Wasswa breaks the news that there are more serious things about which he ought to be concerned.

“Ah, he has a problem with his spleen,” says Wasswa, nodding knowingly. “At times, he gets constipation and some swelling in the legs and arms. There is also some paralysis in the legs. He gets headaches. At times he feels dizziness. His brain arteries need to be detoxified. He has kidney deficiencies. He has bad chest pain. He has high cholesterol. He has poor circulation. And he has problems with his stomach.”

The roster of the young and healthy-looking patient’s conditions seems extreme, but Wasswa is not perturbed.

“He needs to improve his circulation by using our machines and he will need to take our products. If he uses them, he will be fine,” he reassures.

Back in the light and noise of the waiting room-cum-pharmacy, Wasswa shows me some of these products. He picks goods off the shelves, ranging from capsules to toothpastes to body creams, and stacks them on the counter as he explains what they each do. “This takes away all the radiation in your body. This helps with diabetes. This treats ulcers. This is for slimming. This adds more white blood cells to your system. This is for people who are mentally disturbed,” he says.

“These medicines are good for everything,” he concludes finally, the pile of products on the counter now complete. “If you have cancer, we can help. If you have HIV, we can help. Even if you have a hernia or a tumour or appendicitis, you just take our products and they will disappear.”

A national operation

This small store in eastern Uganda employs a handful of staff and, according to Wasswa, receives dozens of patients each day. Wasswa is also frequently heard on local radio advertising his services and has made quite a name for himself in the area. He was previously a school teacher and says his parents were “peasants”, but now, in his 30s, he is anything but. These days, Wasswa drives a shiny four-wheel drive, wears sharp suits and even goes on jet-setting trips around the world. All this makes him quite the exception in Iganga, but across Uganda, this young ‘doctor’ is by no means a solo pioneer and his store is by no means unique.

Similar stores can found all across the country, from Kasese in the west to Soroti in the east, and from Gulu in the north to Entebbe in the south. There are four such outlets in Kampala alone. These stores offer the same diagnostic tests, stock the same range of products, and above all their doors, there hangs the same innocuous green and orange sign which reads: “TIENS: Together We Share Health And Wealth.”
TIENS – also known as Tianshi – is a multinational company based 10,000 miles away in the Chinese metropolis of Tianjin. It was founded in 1995 by Li Jinyuan, who has since become a billionaire from the venture. The company has established branches in 110 countries including 16 in Africa, employs over 10,000 staff globally, and reportedly enjoys net profits worth hundreds of millions of dollars each year.

TIENS first began tapping into the Ugandan market in 2003 and it has grown steadily ever since. There are now around 30 stores across the country, TIENS distributors regularly engage in outreach programmes to rural communities, and according to the company's national chairperson, Kibuuka Mazinga Ambrose, TIENS-Uganda has an annual turnover of around US$6 million.

The company has even bought the most prominent advertising spot on the Health Ministry's official calendar, a particularly brazen move given that none of its outlets are registered health facilities.

Feeding off poor government healthcare

Patients who come to TIENS seek help for a whole range of conditions – from malaria to paralysis – but they tend to tell similar stories of how they arrived here. Typically, they say that they first went to public facilities (some told me they had even visited two or three), but were either not seen to or found the treatment ineffective. TIENS is almost always a last resort. But in a country whose healthcare infrastructure is riddled with chronic problems and which, by some measures, ranks as one of the worst in the world, the last resort is often one that needs to be taken.

In many areas of Uganda, public health facilities are virtually inaccessible, while those who do manage to reach them may find their walls crumbling, their clinics under-staffed, and their shelves bereft of drugs. Although the government has promised to invest more in the sector, much of the country's healthcare infrastructure is in decay. Doctors and nurses are over-worked and underpaid, and although services are meant to be free, in reality patients face many hidden costs.

In this context, stores like Wasswa’s, with its quick turnaround, attentive staff and fully-stocked shelves, offer an appealing alternative. The always conclusive diagnostic tests are highly convenient; attendants’ claims about the healing powers of TIENS products may well be reassuring; and many patients say the fact the medicines travelled thousands of miles from China suggest they must work.

Many customers who use TIENS products also insist that they do work.

On the Friday morning after my tour of Wasswa's clinic, the courtyard next to the outlet is packed. Over a hundred people sit on plastic chairs facing forwards while latecomers lean against the back wall. A red tarpaulin sheet shields the crammed attendees from the sun and gives the whole atmosphere an eerie pink hue.

‘Doctor Julius’, a man in his late-30s/early-40s with an intense glare and impatient demeanour, stands at the front. He has just finished explaining the healing powers of TIENS toothpaste – which as well as cleaning teeth, can be used to treat ulcers, angina and skin problems amongst many other conditions – and he invites attendees who have used the product to give testimony. Four hands go up immediately.

“I had terrible problems with my teeth,” says the first speaker. “I went to see doctors but a new tooth had to be uprooted every week. When I started to use TIENS toothpaste, the pain went away.”

The next patient tells a very similar story before two mothers relay how the toothpaste cleared up their respective children’s skin rashes and burns.

Every now and then over the next few hours, many more attendees are invited to recount their experiences of using TIENS products. We hear how a man with back pain can now walk, how another man was cured of vertigo, and how a woman’s child was once bed-ridden but is now running around. At one point, Wasswa looks particularly pleased as a mother tells of how her young son, who she
had taken to three separate public healthcare facilities before he was cured of cerebral malaria by TIENS, now wants to change his name to ‘Doctor Wasswa’.

“Chinese herbal medicine based on 5,000 years of traditional medicine”

“You see, these products work,” Wasswa announces after one of the testimonies. “At hospitals, they will ask you how you feel, but here, we tell you how you feel. At hospitals, they treat signs and symptoms. Here, we treat causes. At hospitals, they give you medicines made from chemicals which are harmful and can give you ulcers. Here, we use herbal medicines which have no side-effects.”

“This is real,” he continues. “This is Chinese herbal medicine based on 5,000 years of traditional medicine and it works.”

In Kampala, I test this out for myself. I visit a couple of the company’s stores, nestled in the city centre’s endless bustling plazas, and in one of them, managed by an intense man named Frank, I get tested.

Frank, the self-declared “best in the business” at doing diagnostic tests, seems thrilled at my presence and bundles me across to the end of the room. He sits me down and pulls across a thin curtain to give us a modicum of privacy from the handful of waiting patients. He takes out a battered looking hand-held device, pushes a 9-volt battery into its back and plugs a wire into it that branches into two metal tips. He gives me one of the electrified points to hold in my right hand and says he will use the other to press points on my left palm. With a grave look on his face, Frank instructs me to tell him when I feel a tingling. This seems to be a more basic version of the first test I’d seen in Iganga.

To begin with, I report whenever I feel something, which is every single time the tip touches my hand, completing the basic electric circuit. Frank nods excitedly when I do so and explains that I have a serious problem in whichever part of my body he is testing. After a while, however, I decide to stop reporting every time I feel a tingling. Frank lets me get away with one, but after that he frowns when I stay silent and simply keeps the metal point on my hand until I give in, sometimes rubbing my hand and even licking the metal tip if I am being particularly resistant.

In the end, Frank writes out a list of around 25 health conditions including “liver disorder,” “STROKE,” and “enteric fever [aka severe typhoid],” and prescribes a roster of products that comes to over 1 million Ugandan shillings (USH), or around US$400.

Before committing to his costly regimen, I decide to get a second opinion.

In the bright, clean reception of Beijing Clinic, a private health facility in Kampala, I relate my experience to a young Ugandan doctor, who trained and qualified in China, specialising in traditional Chinese medicine. The doctor, who prefers not to be named, laughs as I explain the machines I saw in Iganga and the test I underwent in Kampala. “No machine can test all those things like they claim,” he says.

Next, I show him the TIENS Information Guide, a booklet from which it seems Julius and Wasswa get most of their information. On page three of the booklet, a short disclaimer warns: “Tianshi Company does not make any medical claims whatsoever.” However, the next 60 pages are filled with bold declarations about the powers of its products and instructions on how to treat different diseases.

“Whatever this is, it is not Chinese medicine,” says the Chinese-trained doctor with a combination of amusement and incredulity. He chuckles as he reads about TIENS medicines are supposed to treat about a dozen different conditions each, from preventing cancer to reversing impotence to promoting “the growth of children’s reproductive organs”.

However, the doctor’s amusement soon turns to horror as he reaches the section of the booklet advising distributors on what steps to take when patients are suffering from different diseases. TIENS customers are typically encouraged to undergo diagnostic tests in store, but most who go to TIENS have previously been to a hospital and know some of the conditions from which they are suffering. The company guide offers clear and easy instructions on what they should be prescribed.

Of the few hundred conditions listed, which span from AIDS to Yellow Fever, a handful include the recommendation to ‘see a doctor’. But the rest just list a few products to be taken.

“This is a death sentence,” mutters the doctor, falling silent.

One of the most repeated claims by TIENS distributors is that because the products are ‘herbal’, they have no side-effects. This assertion is used to elevate them
above Western medicines, which they say are made from chemicals and so can be harmful, but the claim is also used to suggest that there are no dangers involved in taking them.

“Even if I tell you to swallow one and you swallow four, there will be no problems,” Wasswa had insisted. But when put to the Chinese-trained doctor in Beijing Clinic, he just shakes his head. “That is a flat-out lie,” he says.

Dangerous supplements

He recalls that last year, he was consulted by police after a man suffering from kidney problems died suddenly from liver failure. A toxicology report found that he had had a toxic overdose and it was suggested that the TIENS supplements the patient had been taking without his doctor’s knowledge had either caused additional problems or reacted badly with other medicines. The man’s family could not afford to get a more detailed medical report, however, and declined to take the matter further.

At another private clinic in Kampala, Dr Wen, a highly-regarded practitioner with three decades of experience, is similarly concerned. “This is not medicine,” he says, “but it is still dangerous. Everything has side-effects. Even herbal medicines and herbal supplements used wrongly can kill.”

I contacted Uganda’s Health Minister, Ruhakana Rugunda, repeatedly for comment, but received no reply.

Apart from the story of the kidney patient, I did not come across other rumours of deaths, but cases of the products not working as miraculously as promised were easy to find. After all, TIENS products are not medicines. Some of the company’s goods have been registered with Uganda’s National Drugs Authority, but as ‘food and dietary supplements’. In fact, stories of TIENS products not fully working were even common amongst some of TIENS most ardent fans.

Back in Iganga, with the courtyard seminar over and Wasswa busy talking to a small circle of attendees eager to hear more, Sarah*, 25, moves towards the back of the courtyard closer to where I am sitting.

During the seminar, she had given testimony telling of how she’d taken her baby boy, who was suffering from sickle cell anaemia, to several hospitals before she came to TIENS. Many of those who told their stories directed them matter-of-factly at Julius or Wasswa, but Sarah had turned to face the crowd and spoken passionately as she’d explained how the products worked wonders.

Asked a few more questions after the symposium, however, her story reveals itself to be far less straightforward. It transpires that her son is still ill. So ill, in fact, that she recently quit her nursing job to look after him full-time. Sarah nevertheless insists that the TIENS medicines work and says the reason her son is still suffering is because his treatment is incomplete. She bought half the products the boy needs for a full recovery but is struggling to find the money to purchase the rest.

Robert, 30, tells a similar tale. He too claims to be a firm believer in the healing powers of TIENS, and acted as my translator throughout the seminar, seemingly on Wasswa’s instruction. Robert says that he came to TIENS with kidney problems and maintains the products worked where hospital treatments failed. Like Sarah’s son, however, he admits that he is still in pain. Firstly, he attributes this to the fact that his kidney treatment is incomplete; he too has had financial difficulties. Secondly, he explains that the TIENS diagnostic test revealed his kidneys are not his only problem; while his original condition may have improved, he now knows he is suffering from other conditions that need to be cured too.

Very expensive

Sarah and Robert reveal that they have each spent USH460,000 (US$180) on products so far, paying in instalments from what they could borrow or scrape together. Sarah says she needs USH500,000 (US$200) more to complete her son’s treatment, but doesn’t know
where the money will come from given that she is now jobless and that the father of her son is in school. Robert says he needs around USH200,000 (US$80) more, but says that as a “peasant”, he too will struggle.

“I haven’t balanced it well,” he says, “but I hope it will balance out soon. I am still feeling pain.”

It is not a coincidence that Robert, Sarah and a few others who spoke to me had all purchased exactly USH460,000 worth of products. Nor is it an inexplicable peculiarity that individuals with no reliable source of income had shelled out what little they had, and more, on TIENS products. After all, TIENS is more than just a supplier of health supplements.

In the symposium in Iganga, once Julius had waxed lyrical about various products, it was time for Wasswa to take over the stage to talk about another benefit of TIENS. Though not before Julius had the opportunity to rouse the crowd.

After finishing his demonstration of TIENS’ disease-curing sanitary pads, Julius put down the product and strolled ponderously along the front of the courtyard before turning to face the audience. “Tianshi!” he shouted suddenly. “Together we share!” came back the reply on cue, a hundred voices amplified by the concrete walls. “Tianshi!” Julius proclaimed a second time, a little louder. “One dream!” came the soaring response. “Tianshi!” yelled the doctor a third time. “The best of all!!” bellowed the crowd.

Next, Julius taught the audience a new trick. Since all points in ours palms relate to different internal organs, he explained, clapping stimulates the whole body and works as a kind of “first aid.” He held his hands apart and, together with the crowd, clapped out a rhythm that crackled across the courtyard. Julius explained that the louder you clap, the greater the benefits to your internal organs, before holding out his hands and going again. And again.

Finally, looking satisfied, Julius completed his session and handed over to Wasswa.

**Good for your wealth too**

“TIENS is not just good for your health,” the salesman proclaimed, taking to the stage, “it is also good for your wealth. If you register with TIENS, they will start to pay you. You come here for treatment, but over time, you will start to get a salary.”

Over the next few minutes, Wasswa explained that this is what he had done and that he was not only receiving thousands of dollars every month now, but had been taken on international trips by the company, received huge cash bonuses and been given a brand new car.

“When you reach a certain level, you start earning,” he said. “And it doesn’t matter if you have no qualifications or education. TIENS doesn’t care if you are educated. TIENS only cares how many products you buy and how many people you recruit.”

Wasswa said these words with a weighty earnestness, but they were not news to half the courtyard. Robert, Sarah and many others around them – all recognisable by the golden lion-shaped badges they were wearing – were not just TIENS patients, but members and distributors already. They were here on Wasswa’s instructions to give testimony and help convince others to join too. For these returning members, TIENS is not just a medical supplier, but a livelihood, an investment, and a chance to follow in Wasswa’s jet-setting footsteps.

Sitting behind his desk at the TIENS-Uganda headquarters, located at the top of King Fahd Plaza on a busy street in Kampala, Kibuuka Mazinga Ambrose is delighted to explain how the business model works in more detail.

“Anyone can join,” says the company chairperson, wearing a bright yellow TIENS-branded cap. “All you need to do is pay a small initial fee of US$20.” Once you have done this, you can buy products at wholesale prices and sell them on at a profit. However, this is just the start, he says. You don’t get rich by selling a few bottles of herbal supplements. Under TIENS’ model, there are eight ranks and you need to move up the levels to really start enjoying the benefits.

The first few levels can be reached simply by buying more products, which essentially brings with it a small discount on goods. However, to get to the bigger rewards, you need to start recruiting others. This way, you receive a commission whenever they make purchases and also get rewarded if they recruit their own followers.

The more people you recruit and the more they recruit in turn, the higher you move up the rankings, and
soon you can just sit back and watch as the commissions roll in. Furthermore, once you’ve reached the eight-star level and keep growing your network, you will eventually become a Bronze Lion, then a Silver Lion, then a Gold Lion, and enjoy rewards of cash prizes, international trips, a brand new 4x4, a luxury yacht, a private jet, and finally a “Luxurious Villa Palace”.

“It’s all about growing your network; their success is your success,” says Ambrose cheerily. “TIENS doesn’t care who you are. Anyone can do it, and there is no limit on what you can earn.”

As the TIENS Guide puts it, joining the company means: “You stop struggling financially,” there is “little risk of losing”, and “if you work for five years you can retire.”

According the company website, over 200,000 Ugandans have joined TIENS, eclipsing even the number of government school teachers in the country.

Given Uganda’s high rates of unemployment – youth unemployment is over 80% according to some estimates – the appeal of membership is clear to see. Decent jobs are scarce and rags-to-riches stories like Wasswa’s are even scarcer.

**Government help**

Furthermore, the company’s image is significantly helped by the Ugandan government. Not only does TIENS advertise on the Health Ministry’s calendar, but according to Wasswa, around 10 MPs are members of the company and at the Iganga seminar, Stephen Wante, the mayor of Bugembe, made a guest appearance. In 2011 meanwhile, Vice President Edward Sekandi officiated at a ceremony in which a distributor was awarded a car and organised for TIENS to donate some of its products to a government health centre. A photograph of Sekandi shaking hands with TIENS’ president also has pride of place on the company website.

However, despite all of TIENS’ promises of wealth and perceived legitimacy, actually making money from the scheme is virtually impossible. At the TIENS headquarters, where members can print out their balance sheets, many leave the office holding spreadsheets indicating that they are owed almost nothing, if anything at all. Meanwhile, back in Iganga, several members who had joined several months ago, attended every bi-weekly seminar, bought lots of products, and gone on recruitment drives, revealed that they had not earned any notable income either. It seems many others have also abandoned the scheme after finding they could not make it work.

According to most TIENS members – both those who are profiting and those who aren’t – the reason for these failures is simple: the individual did not work hard enough. When I asked Sarah why she thought she hadn’t made any money after being a member for five months, for example, she hesitated before Robert helpfully chimed in to say “it means she is not performing well.” Yet Robert had barely received any income either, despite having been a member for six months and having recruited nine people. Other members who had yet to make money also suggested their situation was down to bad luck or poor performance.

This feeling was perhaps most starkly expressed after the seminar as I spoke to Wasswa within earshot of three members, all of whom had been distributors for up to six months yet not come anywhere close to getting a decent income. I asked Wasswa how long it typically takes to break even. “Some people can take a month, but sometimes maybe two months,” he replied. What if someone has been working hard but hasn’t started getting an income after six months, I followed up. “Six months?” Wasswa exclaimed. “No, it’s rare. Very rare. If someone is serious, they should be on a high level and earning well after six months.”

I looked over at the three recruits who all just stared at the floor, looking sheepish and, I thought, ashamed. The reality, however, is that failure under TIENS is not the individual’s fault. In fact, for the vast majority of members, the business model is designed to fail. TIENS in Uganda appears to be little more than thinly-veiled pyramid scheme.

Recruiters emphasise that to join, all you need to do is pay a US$20 membership fee. But in reality that is only the start. Members have to buy products to move up the rankings and then continue to buy goods to keep their accounts open.

Members could make money selling these products, but the idea of shifting all these goods is a non-starter. Not
only does each distributor have to compete with 200,000 other sellers as well as 30 well-established stores, but it doesn’t even make economic sense for customers to buy from individual members when they could sign up to TIENS themselves and get much lower prices anyway.

This is perhaps why Wasswa and other recruiters barely even mention selling products and why the emphasis instead is very heavily on “growing your network”. The incentives for signing up new members are higher than those for sales, the training sessions teach recruits how to sell membership rather than goods; and the TIENS Guide’s main piece of practical advice is a six-step plan of how to “make a name list of at least 100 in a shortest time possible.”

If not from selling products to the public then, the bulk of the money in the TIENS system comes from members’ own pockets as they pay to join, pay to move up the rankings, and pay to keep their accounts open. And it is this same money that finances top-level distributors’ huge salaries, shiny new cars and trips around the world. Given all the money in the system comes from members, the only way this tiny elite profits is because the rest of Uganda’s 200,000 members do not.

TIENS refers to itself as ‘multi-level marketing’, but in reality it seems to be an unsustainable and fraudulent pyramid scheme designed to extract money from the many to pay the salaries of a few.

I later contacted Ambrose, Wasswa and Jamba George, another eight-star recruiter, for their response to these allegations, but they all declined to comment. The manager of TIENS-Uganda, a Chinese expatriate, and the company’s global headquarters in Tianjin did not comment either.

It should also be noted that TIENS is not just in Uganda, nor is it the only scheme of its kind. The US firms Forever Living and GNLD also deal in health supplements and follow a multi-level marketing model, while TIENS’ presence on the continent seems to be particularly strong in West Africa, Ethiopia and Zimbabwe. It is further notable that TIENS has offices in many Western countries, though the products there seem to be marketed more directly as mere food supplements.

Back in the courtyard in Iganga, Robert is listing the products he was prescribed six months ago. Like so many others faced with Uganda’s struggling healthcare system, Robert ended up seeking alternatives and eventually ended up at Wasswa’s busy but welcoming clinic.

The products worked, Robert insists. Up to a point. He just wishes, he says, that he could finish the treatment and be fully cured of his kidney problems as well as the other health conditions detected by the diagnostic test he underwent. But he cannot afford it.

Robert has no other jobs, he says there are hardly any jobs available in the area, and has five children to support. When he joined the company half a year ago, he thought TIENS was the answer to all his prayers, but he is still in pain and deeper in debt.

“Money is a problem, he says. “It is not easy to recruit people and I spend USH12,000 (US$5) every week on transport to come to these seminars.”

I ask him why he is still part of the company despite losing money each week. He pauses for a moment before answering, “I believe I will balance my accounts soon. And I am close to moving up to the next level when I will be able to earn more.”

He explains that a technical misunderstanding delayed him moving up a rank, but that it should be sorted out soon. I point out that even if he moves up a level and earns slightly more than now, he will still be earning a tiny fraction of what he has invested. He nods in agreement, but adds, with a faint smile, “But with TIENS, time is on your side.”

But what if it still doesn’t work out, I push. What if Wasswa is the exception that proves the rule? What if it never works out?

Robert looks me in the eye for a few seconds before gazing out across the courtyard where a few groups of attendees are still standing around chatting. “If the money defeats me,” he says quietly, turning back to me, “I will disappear.”

*Some names have been changed to protect interviewees’ identities.
SECTION 4

MIGRATING AND ENGAGING
PLOUGHING IN AFRICA: THE STORY OF A CHINESE SISAL FARM IN TANZANIA

By Chen Xiaochen

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We set off early in the morning from Tanzania’s economic capital, Dar es Salaam, and head west along the Morogoro road. 320 kilometres away, in the interior of the Morogoro region, is a Chinese-managed sisal farm.

Sisal is a perennial economic crop, the value of which lies in the sisal fibres found in its leaves. These fibres are not only used as the raw material for marine ropes, sacks and mats, but in recent years have gained wider uses as well, including as the core of the steel cables used in lifts in tall buildings and as the raw material for stainless steel polishing cloths.

At the end of the 19th century, German colonisers brought sisal from Brazil to Tanzania. Due to ideal climatic conditions, Tanzania quickly became known as the ‘Kingdom of Sisal’, with the Morogoro region becoming the major sisal-producing region because of the Central Line, a railway built by the Germans.

After a three-hour drive, we pass the regional capital of Morogoro and the roads begin to deteriorate. The four-wheel drive begins to buck with the road surface. After another two to three hours, a sign appears beside a large sisal field: China State Farm.

In the 1990s, the China State Farm group began to invest in farms in Africa. In 1999, it identified good market prospects for sisal. Therefore, China State Farm began to search for suitable farms overseas where sisal could be planted. It had technical support in sisal growing (China State Farm’s associate enterprises have experience in growing sisal in Guangdong, Guangxi, and Hainan provinces) combined with the support of the Export-Import Bank of China (referred to below as China Exim Bank). Tanzania, the ‘Kingdom of Sisal’, was their first choice.

Wang Lusheng, 60, is the head engineer of the sisal farm, and was part of one of the first batches of employees sent over to carry out preliminary investigations. He remembers that at first they settled on another farm in Morogoro region, but had to abandon it after negotiations failed to yield a result.

Just as Wang Lusheng was returning home in disappointment, he ran into another Chinese person. This chance meeting created the sisal farm of today.

Hao Jianguo is currently the president of the Tanzania China-Africa Chamber of Commerce, and is acknowledged by the local Chinese community as an expert on Tanzania. In the 1970s and 80s, he worked in Tanzania for a decade, managing farms. In 1997, the heavily populated and land-poor Jiangsu province was
the first to unveil the strategy of ‘agriculture walking out’. Hao Jianguo, then working in the Jiangsu Provincial Commission of Agriculture, was sent to Tanzania again. At the end of 1999, he chanced to meet Wang Lusheng and his group when carrying out investigations in Morogoro. This tied his destiny to the sisal farm.

With Hao Jianguo pulling the strings, the former Tanzanian ambassador to France finally agreed to sell a total of 6,900 hectares of land and two mismanaged farms in Kilosa county and Rudewa township in Morogoro region to China State Farm for US$1.2 million. In common with many African countries, the state or the community possess the majority of Tanzanian land. Therefore, this so-called ‘land purchase’ is better described as a lease: the buildings and the right to use the land are leased.

In Tanzania, land could be leased out for 33 or 99 years. For instance, the leasing term for a sisal farm is 99 years. The farm owner must pay land-use taxes to the state, though the tax rate is low enough to be disregarded.

In addition to a land use permit, Tanzanian law also contains a ‘de facto possession’ regulation meaning that if the owner does not use a piece of land, the state or community has the right to take it back. Therefore, even if the landowner explicitly possesses the property rights, he could still lose the land due to poor management.

Using the sisal farm as an example, currently only around one fifth (1,381 hectares) of the total farm area of 6,900 hectares is planted. In late 2011, the Tanzanian Finance Minister M. Mkulo visited the farm on his campaign. Some local villagers complained that the Chinese had “occupied the land for over a decade without planting anything” and demanded the government return the land to the state and divide it among local villagers.

Mkulo refused this demand on the spot, instead praising the field management of the Chinese and China’s development experience. He claimed that retrieving the land would scare off Chinese investors, which would then harm Tanzania’s development.

Although the Finance Minister supported the Chinese, the risk of losing the land still bothered the Chinese on the sisal farm. If enterprises that have ploughed the land for over a decade worry about losing it, then the idea of ‘overseas land banking’ – buying land without farming it – is not even worth bringing up.

**Arduous pioneering work**

The farm is located in a grassy area in a forest. Underneath an eye-catching baobab tree are two old, ramshackle single-storey buildings – the dormitories of the Chinese managers. Behind the dormitories is thick forest. The Chinese people who live on the farm are therefore good friends with African insects.

By 6 am, the general manager of the farm, Guan Shanyuan, is already out of bed. Making breakfast – fried chilli peppers – washing the dishes...he has to do everything himself. He even has to generate his electricity himself. “It’s been over a decade, and conditions have always been very tough,” he says.

At half past seven, the Chinese management team get in the vehicle to go to work, right on time. This happens nearly every day. Wang Lusheng says, “We don’t really have days off. We work on Tanzanian national holidays. We even work on Chinese New Year’s Eve.”

Wang Lusheng entered this dormitory for the first time in March 2000. There was no water and no electricity, and he had to wash in rainwater. It was in these conditions that he put together the sisal farm’s Chinese management team and started the arduous labour of the next decade.

Before this, the land had been unused for more than 10 years. The biggest difficulty in reclaiming it as farmland was clearing obstacles, including tall trees, thorny bushes, and weeds taller than a man.

In order to recultivate the land, the Chinese engineering and technical employees led local employees, toiling in the bushes for over six months. They cut down trees, removed grass, filled in ditches and flattened slopes. Finally, in the second half of 2000, just before the mvuli or ‘short rain’ season arrived, they opened up the first parcel of land. That year, they planted around 100 hectares with sisal.

Making sisal ropes at the Chinese sisal farm in Tanzania.
However, at that moment the funding supply was suddenly cut off.

Prior to this, the China Exim Bank had undertaken to provide the sisal farm with a US$9 million loan package. Hao Jianguo remembers that when they saw conditions on the ground at the farm, the China Exim Bank decided that the gap between reality and their expectations was too great. They adjusted their loan policy, requiring China State Farm to produce a security for the loan. However, at that time China State Farm lacked anything suitable to put up as security, and so from 2001 the funding supply was cut.

Sisal is a unique crop. As it grows, it must go through a ‘juvenile period’. It must be nurtured carefully for three years after planting, during which time it cannot be harvested. This means that in these three years there is only the hard ploughing, without the reward of the harvest.

At that time, the farm was preparing to continue planting. Wages were not paid – only living costs. At the hardest time, even money for living costs had to be handed in and paid as wages to local employees in order to keep the farm running.

Even today, Hao Jianguo and Wang Lusheng are moved when they remember that arduous period.

In these difficult circumstances, the sisal farm’s parent company moved funds from China State Farm in Zambito, Tanzania. Combined with US$500,000 subsequently lent by the China Exim Bank, the situation stabilised somewhat. By 2004, the planted area had reached 1,000 hectares and the first batch of sisal was harvested.

After this, the farm gradually entered a period of stable development. In 2008, the farm’s sisal fibre production reached around 1,900 tonnes, which not only balanced revenues and losses, but resulted in a slight profit. In 2011 production reached a peak of around 2,600 tonnes. At a price of US$1,100 a tonne, gross income reached around US$2.86 million.

In 2006 the third Forum of China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) summit was held in Beijing, which influenced the sisal farm deep in the African interior. In 2007, ownership of the sisal farm was transferred to the China National Agricultural Development Group Company (CNADC) in order to help implement the agricultural ‘walking out’ policy.

Six people managing more than 1,000 employees

When our reporter visited the sisal farm, there were a total of six Chinese managers on the farm. In addition to the general manager, Guan Shanyuan, and the head engineer Wang Lusheng, there was also the secretary, financial controller, machinery manager, and general manager’s assistant.

Sisal farming is a labour-intensive industry requiring the hiring of several hundred to over a thousand employees. However, under Tanzanian law there is a limit on the number of foreigners that can be middle managers or above. These six Chinese managers have to manage over 1,000 local employees. Evidently, they have to rely heavily on a local management team.

The 64-year-old head accountant, Mr Migeto, is a key figure in management. From 1990 on, he worked for the former owner of the farm, and knows the land like the back of his hand. The farm has also hired a team of five local middle managers – an HR manager, repairs supervisor, field supervisor, workshop director, and head of security.
Under them, foremen are responsible for helping to manage the fields as well as the workshop, warehouse, and other areas. There are four sisal harvesting foremen, two weed removal foremen, two decortication foremen and two sisal drying foremen. In addition, there are over 100 people employed in the finance, administration, warehouse management, machine repair, security and health aspects of the business.

These people make up the sisal farm’s local management team. They have signed an employment contract with the sisal farm and are formal employees. Their salary and benefits are clearly stipulated in their contracts. Most are paid a fixed salary with a certain results-based bonus.

In addition to the formal employees, the farm employs temporary staff, whose numbers range from a few hundred to over 1,000 based on the season and electricity supply situation. These employees carry out a series of physical tasks ranging from harvesting, transport, processing (decortication), sun drying, polishing, threading, and warehousing. They are mostly paid by the job. They are mostly paid daily wages according to the tasks they perform; they are an itinerant group that is difficult to manage.

These temporary workers are arranged in teams with a dozen to several dozen members, which are managed by a foreman. The attendance register is one of the main tools for managing temporary workers.

Our reporter examined the attendance registers carefully and discovered three interesting aspects. Many people are absent more often than they are at work. Block absenteeism is common – that is, if one person is absent, the people next to them in the register are also absent at the same time. Absenteeism is often greatest on Mondays.

Mr Migeto says frankly, “Us Tanzanians are not hard-working...” The local people’s attitude to work is not comparable to that of the Chinese, but it is often worse even than that of neighbouring countries. “They just want to lead a simple life.”

In Chinese eyes, the locals’ attitude to work makes management very difficult. The method adopted by the farm’s Chinese management is to let locals manage locals in a local way. For example, locals habitually leave work as soon as their job is done, even if it is not yet time to go home. The Chinese management have accepted this habit. In this way, though some production is sacrificed, they maintain relatively harmonious labour relations. If labour relations are generally smooth, this keeps production orderly, which in turn allows production volumes to rise steadily.

Guan Shanyuan emphasises that ultimate decision-making authority still rests with the Chinese, such as who to hire and what position they will be placed in. “We discuss it with them only as a way of respecting and listening to their opinions.”

Mr Migeto also emphasises two points – legal operation and local management. He believes that it is only by respecting the law and having the support of the local management team that six Chinese managers can manage more than 1,000 people, enabling the farm to develop in a stable manner.

A good climate and good people

One weekend afternoon, the sound of drums fills the farm’s leisure club. There is a grand gathering underway.

However, Guan Shanyuan remains tense while he enjoys the entertainment. He constantly asks Wang Lusheng, who speaks Swahili, “What are they singing about? What do the sketches mean? Are they against us?”

Guan Shanyuan’s concerns are by no means groundless. The star of this happy gathering is potentially a source of trouble.

When the gathering had been going on for around half an hour, the male lead appeared. He was the previous HR manager at the sisal farm. This gathering was held to celebrate his retirement. One day in May 2010, a scale disappeared from the farm. The farm’s Chinese management believed that various signs pointed to him being involved. Moreover, he was responsible for security.

The farm suspended him, giving poor security as the reason. However, the former HR manager refused to accept this and sued the farm. The incident was reported in the local media, and the Chinese management decided...
to calm the situation as fast as possible. They settled on this method – holding a grand retirement ceremony and using natural retirement to end this dispute, which had dragged on for over a year.

At the ceremony, the former HR manager gave a valedictory speech, thanking the general manager Guan Shanyuan for his care and attention. Finally, the former HR manager, the Chinese management and our reporter were all invited on stage to dance. With boisterous dancing on the stage and happy whoops off it, the atmosphere reached a peak.

The next day, several farm employees said that the matter had been handled successfully.

“Why did we come here? Was it to increase conflict, or to promote friendship and boost development?” This is the question that Guan Shanyuan asks himself all the time. “If it is to increase conflict, then we should be tough in our responses. But if it is to promote friendship and boost development, then we should take a different approach to problem solving. If we change our approach, then many things get better.”

After the former HR manager retired, he was replaced by Rhoda Kiwambe, a young lady who had just turned 27. In June 2010, she was promoted to HR assistant after the HR manager was suspended due to the ‘scales affair’. That year, she visited China for training along with mechanic Mr Majaliwa. Now she has assumed some of the duties of the HR manager.

The first matter for Rhoda to attend to in her new job was the problem of sisal processors slacking off. She looked pained and said, “Some of them are old enough to be my father.” The only way is to invite the union, the local management, and the Chinese management to sit down together for talks. “Without the cooperation of the union, the managers would be unable to keep the farm running.”

Unions play a key role in Africa’s political and economic life. In Tanzania, the organisation leading agricultural unions is the Tanzania Plantation and Agricultural Workers Union (TPAWU). The union at the sisal farm is subordinate to the TPAWU and accepts its instructions.

According to the chairman of the sisal farm union, A. Majuto, the union currently has around 600 to 800 members. Membership fluctuates with the number of temporary workers, and the majority of the workers (including temporary workers) on the farm are members.

Mr Migeto entered into a deep discussion with Guan Shanyuan on the problem of sisal processors slacking off. Mr Migeto put forward three opinions: 1. Subsidies and benefits for sisal processors should be increased; 2. Weeding should be carried out in a timely manner in order to improve their working environment; and 3. The opinions of Tanzanian management should be sought in the event of any issues, especially those related to dismissals.

The collective minimum wage for Tanzanian agricultural workers is 73,450 Tanzanian shillings per month (around RMB280). The lowest wage at the sisal farm matches this level. Guan Shanyuan explained that the farm pays out around US$60,000 per month in wages for all employees. In addition, they must pay for employee social security, and provide benefits such as meals and medical care.

On the surface, although African people have a radically different value system to Chinese people, in reality the problem is fundamentally socioeconomic – poverty. Although Africa is known as ‘the continent of hope’, the reality of poverty will not be changed immediately. Therefore, Chinese-owned enterprises that ‘walk out’ must first consider how to adapt to this situation, then how to change it.

Poverty alleviation, profit, or strategy?

Investing in African agricultural projects is a strategic move.

China has many people but not much land, and an uneven distribution of water resources. It needs to utilise overseas land and water resources. Chinese enterprises have been encouraged to invest in agriculture overseas, particularly since China formally unveiled the ‘walking out’ strategy in 2002.

However, until now there is still no overall state-level
strategy or planning mechanism on agriculture ‘walking out’, although this is coming. In addition, the strategy as it appears on paper is often rather different to the reality on the ground.

The sisal farm has its own corporate strategy. CAAIC general manager Zhao Yuqin says that the company sees good prospects ahead for the sisal industry, and is preparing to expand its sisal production capability in Tanzania. This includes preparing to build another sisal farm, in Tanga.

However, the sisal farm currently has book assets of RMB40 million and annual sisal fibre production of around 2,500 tonnes, with a value of around RMB20 million. Its annual profits are RMB2.4 million and it owns 6,900 hectares of land (of which 1,381 hectares are planted), employing around 1,000 local employees.

All of these numbers are under targeted values by a factor of 10 or more. Our reporter understands that this is the current state of not just this sisal farm, but of many agricultural enterprises that are ‘walking out’ into Africa.

Interviewees repeatedly stressed the strategic nature of agriculture and sisal. They complained that agriculture in Africa takes a long time to bear fruit and involves high risks. With no policy support, and relying on the strength of one enterprise alone, it is very difficult to get the momentum to make a success of agriculture in Africa.

Hao Jianguo says frankly that the state ownership system lacks flexibility. Some state-owned enterprises exercise overly rigid control over fund disposal rights for overseas projects. Insufficient delegation of authority is not beneficial to enterprise development. In addition, there is still a lack of deep processing with high added value.

A more fundamental problem is now confronting the highest policymakers: What is agriculture ‘walking out’ for? Is it for poverty alleviation and aid, to enhance China’s international image? Is it strategic, in order to solve China’s problems with a lack of land and water resources? Or is it for corporate profit?

Moreover, how do these enterprises that are ‘walking out’ adapt to the African context? How do they handle Africa’s land issues? How do they organise the local farmers, who are vast in number but used to freedom and unused to discipline, without inciting opposition? How do they resolve labour disputes? How do they discharge their corporate social responsibility (CSR) and forge good relations with local communities?

The farm, and its people, grows

In March 2013, President Xi Jinping visited Tanzania. In April, the Finance Ministry asked China Enterprise Appraisals to assess six enterprises that are ‘walking out’ into Africa. One of these was the sisal farm. The farm finally has a new sisal decorticator that is expected to begin field tests in July this year. The farm has also purchased a new earth mover, so that opening up more land for cultivation does not need to be done manually any more.

Hao Jianguo formally left his post at the sisal farm, where he worked for many years, in 2010. He has settled down in a pretty villa on the outskirts of Dar es Salaam. He is currently the head of the Tanzania China-Africa Chamber of Commerce and is throwing his energies into this, in order to attract more Chinese people to invest in Tanzania.

Guan Shanyuan’s Chinese zodiac year arrived, and he was promoted to assistant general manager of the sisal farm’s parent company CAAIC while continuing to serve as the general manager of the sisal farm. He divides his time between Beijing and Tanzania.

Wang Lusheng was promoted to standing assistant general manager of the sisal farm, responsible for the daily running of the farm, while continuing to serve as head engineer. He spent Chinese New Year at the farm again this year. He is approaching retirement age, and cannot decide whether to stay or go: staying might be exhausting, but he cannot bear to leave.

After the former HR manager’s ‘honourable retirement’, he was re-hired by the farm as a supervisor overseeing the construction of a perimeter wall. The troubles between him and the farm have ended.

Rhoda worked hard after becoming HR manager. However, she did not have a great deal of experience, which limited her capabilities. She sometimes found it difficult to handle older male workers. Faced with a strike by farm workers, she felt that her hands were tied. Now she has become a mother and is on maternity leave. The farm has hired a new HR manager to take over her duties.

Mr Migeto continues to devote his remaining energies to the farm, acting as a bridge between the Chinese and the Tanzanians. His son has gone further – to Beijing, where he has been accepted into China Agricultural University to study for a Master’s degree.
FIXING CHINA’S IMAGE, ONE AFRICAN STUDENT AT A TIME

By Simon Allison

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SIMON ALLISON is a senior reporter with Daily Maverick, a South African news and analysis publication. He holds a Master’s degree from the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, and has worked extensively across both Africa and Asia. He is interested in examining the China-Africa relationship from the perspective of Africans in China, and in how China complements its economic muscle with ‘soft power’ initiatives such as the scholarship programme for African students to study at Chinese universities. In 2013 he visited Beijing on a Wits China-Africa Reporting Project grant to research this programme, meeting with students, lecturers and administrators to understand how it works and what its goals are.

In Africa, China has an image problem. You’ve read the headlines: China is flooding our markets with cheap fakes; it is callously poaching our rhinos; it is building stadiums and roads that don’t last a decade; it is undercutting our labour; it is stealing our diamonds; it is coming to colonise us all over again.

Some of this is sometimes true. Much of it is not, or not completely, the product of nervous imaginations and a well-founded fear of foreign nations who take from Africa more than they give. But image is not about substance, it is about perception and, after decades of doing things its own way – consequences be damned – China is wising up to the importance of fixing its controversial image in Africa.

A few initiatives are worth noting. The expansion of Chinese media into Africa can’t be ignored. State news agency Xinhua has become the largest wire service operating in Africa, while the Chinese public broadcaster’s new Africa channel (CCTV Africa) is headquartered in Nairobi with a full complement of African staff. Likewise, there has been a significant cultural investment in the

The entrance to Peking University in Beijing.
form of Confucius Institutes (cultural and language centres designed to rival the British Council or Alliance Française) sprouting all over the continent.

In the long term, however, perhaps the most influential and certainly least examined initiative is the Chinese government’s mammoth scholarship programme, which has grown exponentially over the last decade. There are an estimated 12,000 African students studying right now in China with the support of the Chinese government. This is an astonishingly high figure, dwarfing scholarship programmes offered to African students by any other country.

So, questions need to be asked: What are African students doing there? How are they being treated in China? And who really benefits?

**Coming in from the cold**

To figure this out, I thought I’d better ask a few African students who are actually in China.

Sydwell Mabasa welcomes me into his room at the Communication University of China (CUC). He’s clearly happy to see a fellow South African, and over a hot cup of rooibos – “the taste of home,” he says – we chat about politics and Oscar Pistorius and why exactly those textbooks aren’t being delivered in Limpopo, his home province. I’m just happy to be inside, Beijing in winter is cold and blustery. This is about as far from the warm, blue skies of Africa as it is possible to get.

Mabasa, who works in provincial government at home, is one of 21 African students on a new Master’s programme in international communication (almost all the scholarships are awarded at post-graduate level; the idea is to get people who are already well educated and established in their home countries). He hasn’t contributed a cent to his postgraduate studies, because China is footing the bill.

The course is paid for, as are flights, accommodation, food and even a monthly stipend of US$250. Not too shabby. Neither is his room, a spacious studio with two single beds, a desk, a couple of chairs and an en-suite bathroom (on some mornings, students are even woken up with tea delivered to their door). It’s housed in the 10-storey International Students Centre, a former hotel on campus where all the foreigners stay. “To prevent them infecting the citizenry with their foreign liberal ideas,” jokes a colleague.

It’s a flippan 

where censorship is rife and Facebook and Twitter are still banned? “The education system is good,” Mabasa says. “Most professors who are part of this programme studied in the US and Canada and other areas. We get to explore both sides of the world.”

His sentiments were supported by other students I spoke to, all of whom noted that the course presented both Western and Chinese theories, allowing the students to choose what they think works best. “There is a kind of framing sometimes, trying to push you into viewing the world in a certain light,” said Saleh Yussuf Mnemo, from Tanzania. He’s a journalist with experience at the state-owned Zanzibar Broadcasting Corporation, and also a lecturer at the Zanzibar Journalism and Mass Media College. Saleh says this ‘framing’ is not unique to the Chinese: “Our education in East Africa was mostly influenced by the British, the French, the Germans. Now we are here we get a real insight into what the Chinese perspective is.”

For many of the students, understanding China is just as important as the education itself. There seems to be a recognition among young Africans that China is going to be around for a while, and that there are relatively few Africans who can relate to China at all. Europe and America are known entities, with deep cultural or
historical ties to African societies, but China is still a mystery. To understand China, to be a China expert, is therefore a marketable skill which is valuable regardless of the content or quality of the degree.

This is encouraged by the university, which includes Chinese language, culture and history courses as part of the core programme. “It’s kind of a life-changing experience for them,” comments Professor Zhang Yanqiu, director of the African Communications Research Centre at CUC. She’s also the resident coordinator for the African students in the communications programme, and helps organise trips and cultural experiences – excursions to Shanghai or the Great Wall, for example, or tours of Chinese broadcasters. “They know more about China. Now they know it, they know China personally.”

Zhang, however, is the first to admit that there’s an element of self-interest in this as far as China is concerned. “Between China and Africa they do a lot of business and there is a lot of misunderstanding and misinterpretation of each other. But this programme offers a new channel for Africans to know what’s happening in the real China. For us, it’s a successful programme. The students work like a bridge between the two countries. I think we achieved our goal to let people understand China more, to know the real China.”

The real China

But the real China is flawed, and it can, at times, get in the way of the education. I went with the students to a lecture on new media, a fascinating topic in today’s digital world. The lecture, in English, was sharp, and the discussion freewheeled between analysing the influence on public opinion of US political dramas like West Wing to the skills needed in crafting 140-character tweets. Except they weren’t tweets, of course, because Twitter is banned; they were entries on China’s heavily censored homegrown equivalent, Sina Weibo. Homework for the students, along with an impressive amount of reading, was to set up a Weibo account and start microblogging.

Easier said than done. “Whatever I say, they delete most of it,” says one student, referring to the army of censors working in real-time to monitor the social network. Mabasa refers to the restrictions as “social networking with Chinese characteristics”, a clever riff on the ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’ that forms the basis of the Chinese state’s ideology.

Not that Twitter and Facebook are completely off-limits. Getting round the censors by using a free proxy server is not difficult. I was able to access my Twitter account via a simple Google search for “free proxy server”, and students have even more sophisticated ways to evade the Great Firewall. Even some lecturers – employed by the state – have no qualms about telling foreign journalists like me to connect with them on Facebook.

Still, teaching a course on new media when the most influential new media sites, including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and WordPress, are technically off-limits necessarily compromises the course. As does teaching classes in international journalism when media in China is similarly controlled and driven by the central government, and international news heavily restricted (the New York Times, for example, is unavailable in China).

When put to her, Professor Zhang accepts this criticism, but is quick to point out that the West has its own, different problems when it comes to the media. “We can see that Western media reports on China and developing countries are not very balanced. For both the teacher and the student we need to balance the coverage. I think the developing countries are in one camp, they are not in the camp for Western countries, so we should understand each other, pay attention to each other, produce coverage on each other and keep the information flow very balanced. Although it’s hard to achieve, we have to help each other.”

This is a refrain I hear again and again from Chinese academics and government officials. China and African countries are in the third world together, they are all countries discriminated against by the West; they are brothers or partners or whatever other word describes a friendly, mutually beneficial partnership between two regions of equal stature and development.

Walking around Beijing, it’s hard to buy this narrative. The city is modern, clean and efficient, with world-class public transport. The sheer number of glistening skyscrapers here is overwhelming, more than in the whole of sub-Saharan Africa combined, and they’ve all
got electricity and running water. There is a conspicuous absence of the kind of obvious poverty that blights most African cities. Even the smog points to an industrial capacity that Africa can only dream of. Sure, this is just one city, but China’s got plenty of other developed, industrialised metropolises: Shanghai, Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Chengdu, Chongqing, to name but a few. Africa, as continent, has a lot of catching up to do.

“When I came here, actually it’s quite different from home,” says Saleh. “China has gone very far ahead. My expectation is that the Chinese themselves can feel like maybe they are in heaven.” Heaven might be stretching it, but the point remains: China and Africa are, quite conspicuously, not at the same level of development, no matter how often African and Chinese leaders express their fraternal solidarity.

This cognitive dissonance between the image projected by China in Africa and the reality experienced by students can generate feelings of wariness and caution. Gloria Magambo, who is a manager in the performing arts section of the National University of Rwanda (which is state-run, naturally, there is a theme here), found that her perceptions of China changed dramatically when she arrived in Beijing.

“Before I came here, I didn’t know much about China and didn’t even fear China at all and didn’t even care. But now that I know China and actually get to discover who the Chinese are and what they are doing, that is when my fear is rising instead. I have discovered the strength of the Chinese, they are very determined people, and by studying their history I know that whatever the Chinese want they can get it… People with such determination, if their inner motive is colonisation, we’re in trouble, we cannot beat them.”

The geopolitics of brand-building

To find out more about China’s motivations, at least as far as its African scholarship programme is concerned, I went to speak to Professor Liu Haifang at Peking University (it’s always Peking University, not Beijing University, a mistake which got me hopelessly lost in the city’s northern suburbs).

Peking University is China’s oldest, and it shows; while there are plenty of the big utilitarian concrete buildings which dot other campuses, here there are also grand old halls, pretty frozen-over lakes and elegant footbridges which lend it an academic gravitas shared by some of the world’s very best universities, like Oxford or Princeton. It also hosts its fair share of African students, some of whom are taught by Professor Liu, who also happens to be one of the leading Chinese experts on the educational links between China and Africa.

There are a couple of things she is eager to set straight. First of all, she says, it’s important to understand that Africans have been coming to study in China for decades, and that there are plenty of African students who are here on their own initiative, without any government support. The figures she quotes take me by surprise: 18,000 self-supporting African students in China compared to the 12,000 on scholarships.

And the more scholarships China gives out to Africans, the more Africans come on their own, thanks to word-of-mouth networks – although, Professor Liu points out, this is a subsidiary benefit of the programme, and not a motivation for it. (I met one of these self-supporting students. He is Kenyan, and was most bemused when he was sent to study in China. His brother had been sent to the US, but, he said, his mother didn’t know which way the world was going and wanted to hedge her bets.)

The other issue she wanted to clarify is that the central government is not the only driver of the scholarship programme. Increasingly, local governments and companies are seeing the benefits of expanding their ties with Africa, and sponsoring a few scholarships is seen as a relatively easy way to do this.

But, overwhelmingly, the scholarship programme is still a central government effort, and Professor Liu is crystal clear about what’s in it for China: “The benefit is image, image-building among Africans. If there is a better image about the Chinese government and its support of education among youth, then young people can come to work for Chinese companies and spread good messages to their community.”

This makes sense. Professor Joseph Nye famously coined the expression ‘soft power’ to talk about the more intangible influences of culture and media in international relations. It’s something the US, with global icons like Hollywood, McDonald’s and Michael Jackson has in spades, while many people would struggle to name five famous Chinese people.

As China’s military and economic might has increased dramatically over the past two decades, its soft power has not kept pace. By training a new generation of Africa’s best students, China hopes to change this and exponentially increase the number of people who feel that they understand China and would orientate themselves
in China’s direction, a necessary complement to China’s ambitious economic engagement in Africa.

But, being China, it’s doing it its own way, and this is something that Professor Liu worries could one day undermine the whole effort. Her concern lies in how scholarship students are chosen; more specifically, that attempts to introduce a unified, merit-based system to award scholarships have foundered. In fact, responsibility for selecting students is often delegated to individual African countries, meaning there can be large disparities in selection criteria, creating a system that is ripe for abuse.

Although she was careful not to say it directly, Professor Liu implied on several occasions that in some countries, the process was not as transparent as it should be, and she was not the only one. One researcher, speaking to the Daily Maverick off the record, said that some Chinese diplomats use the scholarship programme as a carrot with which to reward co-operation from African governments.

“The traditional mindset among some Chinese officials is that they still think the most important thing is to leave enough quota, enough scholarships to give to special persons, the elites. They go to officials’ children or special connections.” The researcher added that this attitude is not always supported by the central government, who are taking a long-term view of the scholarship programme and what its benefits should be. “If you only give scholarships to so-called special relations, then you cannot keep the benefit at all. He will go, he will leave the relationship, and then you have to give to another person, and another person, and it can actually be a very bad cycle.”

A rare publicised example of how this occurs was revealed by Namibian tabloid Informante in 2009. “High-ranking government officials are grabbing educational scholarships offered by China for their children and close relatives,” wrote the paper in a stunning exposé.

“Investigations show that high-profile figures ranging from former president and founding father, Sam Nujoma; current President Hifikepunye Pohamba; government ministers overseeing procurement of multi-million dollar deals with the Chinese government; senior military and several government officials are snatching the scholarships which are supposed to benefit mainly students from less privileged families for their children and relatives.”

Four years later and this scandal continues to dog the Namibian government. The country’s main independent newspaper, The Namibian, recently published a strongly-worded editorial demanding some kind of inquiry into the abuse of scholarships, and The Namibian’s editor, Gwen Lister, told Daily Maverick that she’d seen nothing to persuade her that the situation had changed.

Playing the long game

The big question, really, is will it work? China’s scholarship programme to Africa is remarkable in its scale and intent. At its worst, it’s a brazen attempt to hijack the loyalty of Africa’s ruling classes by going after its youth; at its best, it is a genuine effort to give thousands of Africa’s brightest students the extended education they can’t afford to get anywhere else, and prepare them for a world in which Africa’s orientation will inevitably shift eastward.

Either way, it’s a long game. The programme started in earnest in 2009, and most graduates from it are still in their 30s. China’s selection criteria (favouring both previous work experience and, at times, political connections) means that, within the next couple of decades, many of these graduates are going to be in positions of power and influence. Their experience in China will leave them well-equipped to deal with Chinese businesses and officials, and perhaps favourably disposed to do so. They will also be in a position to tone down some of the hyperbole that dominates the China-Africa political discourse.

But China shouldn’t expect to have it all its own way. “We’ll be influenced by our time here, but that does not mean we’ll be totally in favour of them,” says Saleh, the Tanzanian student. “It’s not like a father and child. We are the future leaders of our countries and we’ll have to look for the future benefit of our countries. We know what we are doing.”
As the only child of working class parents in China's Liaoning province, Liu Dong knew education was the way to a better life. Liu dedicated his weekdays to his schoolwork; he would start studying at 5.30 am. By 7 am he was seated in class waiting for the teacher to begin the day's lessons. Once he got home he would study again until he went to sleep at 10 pm.

Today 37-year-old Dr Liu Dong is the managing director of Tubatse Chrome Minerals, a Johannesburg-based mining company specialising in the extraction of chrome ore used to make stainless steel. The company is part-owned by Sinosteel Corporation, one of China's largest resource development and trading companies. Dong's office is on the 16th floor of the Sinosteel building in the Sandton business district. He is one of a number of professionals employed by large Chinese companies in Johannesburg.

Origins of Chinese business in South Africa

Johannesburg has one of the largest populations of Chinese immigrants in South Africa. Their origins date back to the early 20th century when families moved to 'the mountain of gold', finding work as traders and small business owners when they were denied land ownership and individual mining rights.

Today, Chinese migration into Johannesburg continues to grow, but the scale of trade has diversified. Johannesburg has become the preferred location for Chinese businesses with investments in Africa. Many of these are state-owned companies that came to South Africa at the onset of the country's democracy, drawn in by the rich natural resources, developing infrastructure and strict legal policies that provide a stable environment for business.

According to Erwin Pon, business development director at Rand Merchant Bank, popular sectors for Chinese business in South Africa include mining, finance and infrastructure development. And the professionals are well trained in these sectors. “Many of them have been educated overseas [in China and other countries] and they are very experienced in their fields. They [Chinese professionals] are experts and a lot of them are geologists and miners and engineers.

Dong’s reasons for coming to Johannesburg differ from those of small business owners. For him it is about carrying out the company’s strategic plans rather than searching for opportunities for personal wealth and a better life. He and many of his colleagues are fluent in
OF THE 350,000 CHINESE IMMIGRANTS IN SOUTH AFRICA, PROFESSIONALS ONLY ACCOUNT FOR ABOUT 5% OF THIS FIGURE.

both Mandarin and English and are committed to serving Chinese state-owned companies.

Companies like Sinosteel deploy their employees globally. Sinosteel has 86 subsidiaries – like Tubatse Chrome Minerals – 63 of which are in China and 23 abroad. Apart from South Africa, Sinosteel also has offices in India, Australia, Singapore, Indonesia, Germany, Zimbabwe and the Philippines, with representative offices in Vietnam and Turkey. These countries are linked by a network of skilled, well-travelled professionals like Dong, who link Chinese businesses with new markets.

Who’s willing to take the leap?

Pon says age influences the extent of the professionals’ nomadic lifestyles. In Johannesburg, professionals vary in age from their late 20s to late 40s and, he says, their age allows them to make the jump into unfamiliar territory. “Before that [age], you don’t have the money to cover costs or you are still studying and after, in your early 50s onwards, you’re retiring and you don’t really take the chance.”

Chinese professionals like Dong form a very small section of the Chinese immigrants coming to South Africa, according to Pon. Of the 350,000 Chinese immigrants in South Africa, professionals only account for about 5% of this figure. Roughly 60% of the professionals are male and 40% female. Francis Lai Hong, treasurer of the Chinese Association of Gauteng, says China produces over 18,000 engineers a year. Even with China’s major interest in mining, few of these professionals choose to work in Africa.

Africa is a professional no-go zone

Africa is not the first choice for most Chinese professionals. What deters them, Dong says, is the South African crime rate.

Thirty-year-old Jin Zhang had a difficult time convincing her parents that moving to South Africa was the best choice for her career. Zhang has been working for the China-Africa Development Fund in Sandton for a year and heads up the Swaziland and Mozambique representative offices. She chose to come to South Africa when all her colleagues refused to be positioned in Johannesburg.

‘People always ask my parents: ‘How can you let your only child move to South Africa?’ Most of the parents, if their kids were in New Zealand or Australia, they wouldn’t ask: ‘When are you coming back?’ They would say: ‘We are so proud of you.’” Regular relocation is part of the package for professionals employed by state-owned companies. This can sometimes come at a cost to the families of the employees.

Planning for the future

Unlike many state-employed professionals, who do not have any say over where they are stationed, Dong specifically requested to work in South Africa. He has been in Johannesburg since 2007 and currently has no plans for moving back to China. Dong’s wife of four years recently joined him in South Africa and is making a home for herself in Johannesburg.
“She’s a student at Wits University now. She likes it very much. She doesn’t want to go back,” he chuckles. Although they do not have children, Dong is aware that starting a family means he will have to decide whether to return to China or not.

But for Zhang, the prospect of having children in South Africa is more appealing than doing so in China. She says, in China, public healthcare is of better quality than the private healthcare system. But the large population means that doctors do not have the time to give every pregnant woman a long or thorough medical examination.

“For an appointment with a doctor, you have to wake up at four o’clock or three o’clock in the morning to queue there until eight o’clock, when they start giving out the tickets. And then you will have a minute to see the doctor at 10 or 11. And the doctor will probably only see you for 10 minutes or 15 minutes. Then you will be kicked out from the room.”

Access to healthcare, and the freedom she believes South African children have, are reasons she intends to have her children here. “It’s so great to have a South African environment to grow up in. It’s such a relief when you don’t always have to be learning and studying with no other things to do. No activities, no sport. Nothing but studying.”

Home is where the job is

Next door to Sinosteel are the offices of the world’s second-largest banking group, China Construction Bank Group (CCB Group). In an air-conditioned boardroom, 35-year-old Yu Yunchuan says: “If I had a choice I would go to Hong Kong. That’s a nice country and the culture is similar to China’s. So [I would go to] Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan and even some European countries also.”

Yu has worked for the CCB Group for 13 years and moved to Johannesburg in 2011 to head the marketing department. Unlike Dong and Zhang, he did not choose to move to Johannesburg and he has no control over how long he will stay, apart from the stipulation in his contract that he can only stay in South Africa for a maximum of four years before being repositioned. Because of this short time frame, he has left his wife in China. He feels it is pointless to disrupt her life for a brief stay in another country. Yu does not say much else about his family. For him, life in Johannesburg is about fulfilling his duties to his employer before heading back to China. And given the growth of Chinese banking in South Africa, it is possible that his contract may be extended.

Banking on more growth

Banking is booming, and it is likely that more Chinese like Yu will come to work in this sector. Pon says China is currently Africa’s largest trade partner and “the largest trade partner for South Africa and it’s grown literally ten-fold in the last 10 years”. According to Pon, the value of trade between China and South Africa has increased from about US$20 million to about US$200 million.

Since 2008, three of South Africa’s largest banks have formed partnerships with Chinese banks. The most prominent of these is the partnership between Standard Bank and the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC), which has a 20% stake in the Standard Bank Group. In 2009, First Rand Bank signed a strategic co-operative agreement with the CCB Group, which is an agreement that the two banking groups will work together in the South African market. This year, Nedbank signed an agreement with Bank of China, which is less formal than the Standard Bank partnership, but is also a contractual agreement for the two banks to work together.

Although Chinese banks in South Africa were initially established as financial support structures for emerging Chinese companies operating in Africa, they are now also seeking to incorporate themselves into the local market. Yu’s purpose in the CCB Group’s South African branch is to facilitate this growth and integration.

Making the cut – employment requirements for professionals

As valuable as professionals like Yu are, South African-born Chinese who are fluent in Mandarin and English remain the most valuable employees. Tubatse Chrome Minerals employs 6,500 southern Africans, many of whom are miners, and only 20 immigrant Chinese staff. Dong says the ability of South African-born Chinese to act as a link into the South African environment makes them sought after and highly paid.

But Dong claims finding these South African professionals is difficult. The difficulty is finding people with a qualification higher than a Bachelor’s degree in South Africa, especially in the fields of computing and technology. The salaries of South African professionals are
also much higher than those of their Chinese counterparts. These factors make hiring professionals from China the simpler option.

**Finding the recipe for integration**

Yu takes it upon himself to help the newcomers at CCB Group integrate into the South African environment. He says following employment protocol is difficult for the Chinese. “For example if a local employee’s starting time is 8.30 am they will make sure they get to the office before that. For a Chinese guy it’s not that way. He can come here at 8.45 am or even later,” Yu says.

The source of the problem, he believes, is embedded in Chinese culture. “When you’re cooking, the Chinese philosophy is rough. It’s more-or-less. When you’re cooking soup, the Chinese recipe will tell you to add one big spoon or one small spoon. But nobody knows the exact figure. But here, it will have the exact figure like, add one litre. So the different cultures add to the different working ways.

**Drawing the line – class and socialisation**

For these nomads, work is the place where they connect in a disconnected enterprise. Dong says the scattered location of Chinese professionals opens them up to interacting with colleagues who differ in race, background and culture. This is in contrast to the interaction in areas like Cyrildene, where a large community of Chinese traders and their families reside. Here, Chinese residents have limited socialisation with people outside their community. Both Dong and Zhang say their educational and current social class make it difficult for them to identify or socialise with Chinese people in Cyrildene.

Being in Cyrildene is not Dong’s idea of downtime. He prefers playing golf, especially when it involves trying out courses around the country. He regularly plans trips to the coast, where he gets to do two of his favourite things – be at the sea and play golf in new terrains. “I travel all over, the West Coast, Bela-Bela, Drakensberg. And now I want to make time to go to the West Coast again, because I love travelling and there are some nice courses by the coast.”

For Yu, Cyrildene is just a place he visits when shopping for Chinese products, but he does not consider going to the area to socialise with the locals. “Don’t be confused. Actually we are different. Although we are the same skin, we have the same blood, we are the same race, we are different. Maybe because of educational background.”

Lai Hong of the Chinese Association of Gauteng says the Chinese professionals are a growing middle class and the type of individuals who “want things like Louis Vuitton or Gucci or Fendi bags”. Their class makes them more integrated into South African society than residents of Cyrildene, many of whom have been here for more than a decade.

“It’s not so much a class distinction as much as it is a mindset distinction. They say that you go to university to learn a degree, but that’s not true. You go to university to learn a way of life,” Lai Hong says.
Soweto’s rich history, particularly during the struggle against apartheid, is well documented since the first settlements in 1904. However, the story of the Chinese community – which has existed in the township since its beginnings – is yet to be explored.

Dianne Leong Man, co-author of the book Colour, Confusion and Concessions, says there have been many Chinese people in Soweto since the township was founded. Klipspruit is where Soweto was born, with the emergence of township clusters housing black communities. Black people continued to move to the township both voluntarily and forcibly during apartheid. At the same time, Chinese people found a home in nearby Kliptown.

“Kliptown had a huge Chinese community and had a Chinese school run by nuns. That’s how big it was. A lot of them had shops in Moroka and a lot of them used to play ‘fafi’ [a game of chance] in Pimville and places like that. So there was a lot of interaction between the Chinese in Soweto.”

Displaced Chinese move into Soweto

Chinese people also lived in Sophiatown and Newclare and when those suburbs were declared white areas in 1950, the Chinese community was forced to move and left displaced.

During the wave of violence against the repressive apartheid system during the 1970s, Gerard Li, a South African-born Chinese man, was working for his father in Soweto. He saw people being shot and necklaced in front of him. Li later started a business delivering meat for supermarkets in the township during the 1980s.

“It was hard for me to do deliveries in Soweto. I had to be involved in a lot of community projects to be protected. Not all black people took well to Chinese people in Soweto. Some hated us, especially local businesses hated me.” Li says he was resented as an interloper in the
township’s business world, which was run by black men.

Because of the Group Areas Act of 1950, which assigned racial groups to different residential areas, Chinese people could not trade in white areas and the government did not know where to locate them. “Apartheid was hectic … You could either live in a black, Indian or coloured area. You weren’t allowed to live in a white area or have a business there.”

Li says some Chinese people, mostly South African-born, could find a ‘gap’ in Soweto and moved to the township. After moving to Soweto, they created a community of shopkeepers in Moroka and Kliptown. “They couldn’t be put into a little group area by themselves and trade among themselves,” says Dianne Leong Man. “That was the biggest problem for the Chinese, losing their livelihood.”

It was an adapt-and-survive approach for the Chinese community, Li explains: “When you don’t have a choice, you are forced to do things. When you don’t have a choice, you do whatever to survive.”

Li now has a butchery and supermarket, a business that has been at the heart of Moroka for nearly 20 years. Li recounts the criminal violence he witnessed during his years in Soweto: “I’ve seen people in my store back in the 1990s being put in a car boot and they were gone. I knew they would beat the shit out of him. I think as a Chinese guy, if you operated in Soweto back in the 1990s, you had to be super tough. Now it’s alright. I’ve been here so long, it’s like I’m a black man.”

The reason Chinese shop owners chose Soweto as a location for trade was because of the township’s large, dense population, says Man. “They [Chinese people] could go into the fringes of Kliptown and Moroka, just on the edge of Soweto. It would be a place among the black communities where they would go and buy in local stores and not go to the big supermarket.”

New and old Chinese residents

Soweto is a tale of two worlds for the Chinese. The community in the township is made up of Chinese people who have lived in Soweto for decades and Chinese foreign nationals who have only recently set up shop.

One of the recent arrivals is Leon Feng. The only thing Feng knew about South Africa while living in China was the boom in gold and diamonds. Seven years later, the 31-year-old has struck gold in his own right – as a trader of Chinese herbs and medicine. He has three medicine shops, one in Dobsonville, one in Protea Glen and the other in Protea Gardens, all in Soweto. He chose Soweto as the location for his business because of the many black people who form part of his clientele.

“So many people stay here. That’s why I opened a shop. I also came to Soweto to help people. Our medicine can help people. There are few Chinese medicine traders, that’s why we do business.”

Feng says doing business outside of Soweto would be difficult because “white guys don’t trust our stuff, they prefer to go to the pharmacy”.

Locals walk through his doors and tell Feng their personal problems. Some customers communicate their problems in Setswana or isiZulu, of which Feng understands a smattering. He then gives a diagnosis and a remedy for the ailment. His shop provides tea, tablets and incense as remedies for a plethora of medical problems, from fertility complaints to matters of the bedroom.

“My products work,” he says emphatically. “If it doesn’t work they never come to buy or they buy once and leave or they talk bad things to other people. They like my medicine.”

Feng is not the only Chinese foreign national in the shopping centre. However, the other shop owners are not as proficient in English, opting to speak African languages.

Feng says when Chinese people arrive in Soweto they learn a local language before they learn English because “if you can speak Zulu, it’s better than English”. Feng has learnt the basics of local languages. He speaks a little isiZulu and Setswana, peppering his conversation with “Unjani, Ngiyaphila gogo and madala [I am fine granny and grandpa]”.

Speaking local languages allows Feng to know locals
better, he says. "South Africa is very good. The locals treat me very good, so kindly. I like these people."

Born to Chinese parents, who themselves were born in South Africa, Graham Sing is a 42-year-old second generation South African who owns a butchery in Soweto.

Sing’s uncle, who now lives in Australia, opened the butchery before 1994, at a time when the livelihood of many Chinese people depended on small businesses in townships. "They could only open small shops or butcheries and that’s what he did at the time. It was during the apartheid era, he couldn’t really do anything. Butcheries and supermarkets, that’s what the Sings could do at the time. Only later, when the laws were relaxed, then Chinese people could branch out to do other things."

Some Pimville locals have grown up with the butchery and Sing’s business is part of the community. Sing says his experiences in Soweto have been good, much like the experiences of his uncle before him. "People are friendly, you do get a bit of racism, harmless banter, but not so much. People will say 'Oh you are a Chinese in a black area'. Once they get to know you, they leave you alone."

**Hot spots**

Despite Sing’s integration into the community, he is wary of crime. The butchery has been broken into, though Sing himself has never been attacked. In some parts of Soweto, foreign nationals have been victims of violence and locals have looted their shops.

A researcher of the Chinese diaspora in Johannesburg, Khangelani Moyo, is not aware of Chinese immigrants moving into Soweto in any numbers. He says xenophobic attacks on Somalis and Bangladeshis are well known, but such attacks on the Chinese community are not common. "They are not in direct contact with poor people in townships and informal settlements as they are mainly in China malls."

South Africa continues to see an influx of Chinese immigrants who establish their enterprises, and Moyo says, "when such a time comes when the Chinese are directly in contact with locals, then maybe you will have issues of attacks on the Chinese."

While the Chinese approached in Soweto have not experienced such attacks, Sing’s butchery almost had a violent end once. "Someone was telling me that there was a riot here, when my uncle was here. They were burning shops and the older generation of people said, 'Don’t burn this shop, leave the Chinese alone,' and they moved on."

If you are good with the locals and if something happens, they will look after you some day."

Sing says many Chinese are not scared to go into ‘hot spots’ riddled with crime and violence in Soweto. “They know the market there and they were brought up with black people. My parents used to tell me that they played with black people. They were classified as black. They couldn’t go on the bus, they couldn’t walk on the street. That’s why they are comfortable with black people.”

Dianne Leong Man says the Sing family’s experience is not unusual: “They [Chinese people] co-existed for so
many years in Newclare, Martindale and Sophiatown. It was a way that they could live in South Africa.”

**New arrivals**

Sing's only concern is crime, which could force him to emigrate. He says it was also the main reason why so many of the second generation of Chinese South Africans have emigrated. But the crime does not deter new Chinese people from coming to Soweto to seek better opportunities.

“The reason why immigrants come here is for business and to make money. That’s why they are building all the malls and shops…so they can make a killing.”

His uncle sold the butchery to Sing and his friends. But the business has taken a turn for the worse. Sing says, before 1994, the butchery had a lot of customers and locals supported his uncle’s business. But now, with the emergence of supermarkets and malls in Soweto, there is more competition. Sing will soon sell the butchery to a Chinese buyer and has started a new business with a lucrative new market – a shop selling the heads, feet and other offal of livestock.

“I’m doing it more for the black imports, the Malawians, Nigerians and Somalis, they are more into the head of cows and sheep. With the locals, they never used to eat those. I’m branching into that side now.”

New Chinese migrants arrive in Soweto with minimal English language competence and limited knowledge of the commercial market. “You find that some Chinese people will work in the shops as apprentices, then with time they move on to establish their own businesses,” says Moyo.

One such apprentice is Ron Yang, manager of a Protea Glen supermarket, owned by a local Indian businessman. Yang hopes to open his own medicine shop in Soweto.

Yang says he loves Soweto because it is welcoming of Chinese people. He can understand South African languages, mainly Setswana and isiZulu, which he learnt by speaking to locals. Yang also says Soweto and its people treat Chinese people well. “Chinese people are too much in Soweto, you get Japanese, Korean, Taiwanese – in Soweto all are welcome.”

“People in Soweto treat me well. Bad experiences towards Chinese people are scarce. They greet me saying ‘Chinese, China’ and I say ‘hello’ to them.”
ECONOMIC NOMADS IN GUANGZHOU, A CITY OF FLOWS

By Sam Piranty

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At about 5am every morning outside the Don Franc hotel in the Xiaobei Lu district of Guangzhou, I’m awoken by a cacophony of noise. The main culprits ruining my morning lie-in are some serious squabblers.

About 20 men from the north-western provinces of China, dressed in polo shirts and trousers, are furiously bartering over currency exchange rates as they transfer what looks like hundreds of thousands of dollars and yuan. Nearby sit about ten Uyghur men from Xinjiang, with thick, twitching moustaches aggressively touting rides on the back of their three-wheeled motorbikes with makeshift umbrella roofs to keep off the rain. Next to them Indians, Bangladeshis, Pakistanis, Egyptians, Moroccans and Lebanese argue and laugh over prices of kitchen doors, rubber ducks, clothes, hair extensions, toilet seats, football boots and mobile phone accessories with their Chinese counterparts. Stall holders sit drowning in various products, their heads the only body part visible above their sea of goods. Among the morning soundscape one also hears tales of Lagos, Luanda and Lesotho as traders from Cairo to Cape Town and Senegal to Somalia discuss their latest travel and business plans while the morning train chugs along the overhead tracks.

Everyone and everything is on the move, every day. Cash quickly changes hands, goods are hurried into clapped-out Nissan vans, and buyers jump into taxis while answering two mobile phone calls at once. It is true that there are many African traders in this part of the city, but to simply label this, as many commentators have done, ‘Africa Town’, ‘Chocolate City’ or ‘Little Africa’ is misleading. In fact, most people who live locally have never even heard those descriptions. This is a part of a city, orchestrated by flows of people and cash, that

Guangzhou night market.
is constantly moving and adapting. No label sticks. ‘Chocolate City’ does not exist.

**Straight to Guangzhou**

The history of the Xiaobei Lu area is fascinating. Recounting the tale told to him by a long-term Guangzhou resident, researcher Roberto Castillo suggests that only 30 years ago the area was farmland. “The first people to come were internal Chinese migrants from Hunan province,” he says. “They developed the land and built some of the buildings and structures that are there today. Once the land had been developed, then came migrants from the Middle East.”

Many of these migrants acted as middlemen, sourcing and distributing products for their African clients. However, from the mid-1990s, many of the African traders permanently residing in the city today decided to cut out the middlemen and head straight to Guangzhou themselves. “By around 2004,” Castillo continues, “there were more and more Africans, and by 2006-2007 almost all the Arab traders had moved away.”

The early period saw many African traders concentrated around the Xiaobei Lu and Sanyuanli areas. However, over time Castillo suggests that we could no longer talk about a concentration of African migrants in one or two places. “There are many Africans spread in many different places,” he explains. “What was once a more stable, set community is now an archipelago, spread throughout north-western Guangzhou.” The population is also a largely transient one, with many traders staying for a week or two before moving onto another destination. Knowing how many African migrants are currently in the city is a difficult to impossible task.

**Home is moving**

The hotel I’m staying in is famed for its African clientele which is the main reason why every so often immigration police, dressed in light blue and black uniforms, loiter outside and in the markets asking every black man or woman for their passport. The hotel is used as much for sleeping as it is for storing goods. Beds get lost underneath colourful bags bursting at the seams with clothes, shoes and various kitchen appliances. Many have to squeeze through the door and clamber up the mountains of bags to fashion a place to sleep, three inches from the ceiling.

Coming back from breakfast, as I walk, shoes clicking down the hallway towards my room, a man pokes his head around his door: “This is why Africa is moving up and why you have an economic crash. White men always walk so slow”, he shouts. David* is from Nairobi and has been in Guangzhou for three days. His room is already full to the brim with bags of mobile phone headsets. The reason he looked out of his room was because he thought I was the porter coming to collect his goods to take to the port. “I have spent about US$20,000 here,” says David. “Once I get everything shipped back home, I’ll have doubled that. Africa has lots of phones. They all want to talk but are too lazy to hold them so they need headsets. I’ve got no time to waste though, I go to Vietnam next. It is cheaper there.”

David is reiterating something I was to hear from dozens of others. China, and Guangzhou in particular, has always been known as the place to come and purchase cheap goods. However, with rising living costs and greater visa restrictions, many African traders are looking elsewhere to source their products. Vietnam, Thailand and Turkey were all consistently mentioned as more lucrative places to visit.

I arrange to have a drink with David later in one of the bars surrounding the hotel. David takes me down a


Guangzhou street trading.
crooked, winding alleyway and up a flight of stairs lit by a neon sign saying 'African food. This Way'. As we enter the bar there is a tense atmosphere. Everyone is on edge. You could hear a pin drop if it were not for the rather scratchy sound of a Chinese football commentator coming through the speakers. There is no fight or argument. Chelsea are playing a friendly. We take a seat at the back of the room as we order a couple of beers.

“You know, I have watched Chelsea in eleven different countries,” says David. He is talking to me but with his eyes fixed on the six different screens all showing the same match. “I have watched them in India, China, Vietnam, Japan, South Korea, Kenya, Tanzania, England, Scotland.” He pauses before whispering to me in a Scottish accent that England will never win the World Cup again. He seems upset when I agree. “And then also in Bangladesh and Uganda”.

David travels regularly between Africa and parts of Asia sourcing goods and shipping them back home. “What kind of things do you trade?, I ask David. “Everything. Seriously, everything,” he answers. “If you wanted something, I could get it for you. I move wherever a product is cheapest. You have to be alert and ready to go at a moment’s notice, else, as a trader you will never make money.” We pause for a moment as Chelsea hit the crossbar and the whole bar hold their heads in their hands before David continues, “I have been travelling for almost thirty years. Flights are so cheap now. I don’t stop.”

David spends about six weeks a year in Kenya, his country of birth. I ask him where home is for him. “Ha. Home?”, he replies. “What is that? A house? Home is where you feel calm, home is where you feel settled, right? Well, for me, I spend most of my time in the air or on a boat. Home for me is on a flight from Beijing to Tokyo. Home for me is on a train from Beijing to Guangzhou. Can it be possible that home is moving? Well, whatever, home for me is moving.” Chelsea go on to win and with David in a good mood we move on to another watering hole.

**Economic nomads**

Later that evening I am introduced to a number of other traders all from East Africa who spend the majority of their time away from that part of the continent. All of them tell me about how they hop from one trade hub to the next within a network of Asian marketplaces sourcing goods and sending them to various African buyers. They are the modern-day economic nomads.

My conversations with them are frequently interrupted by phone calls or text messages from one of their many mobile phones. Each trader has at least three – one for each country they trade in or as one told me: “one for each girlfriend.” The text messages and phone calls are not only from girlfriends or business associates, however. Many are from members running text networks alerting those without visas to the location of the immigration police. I recall one afternoon in a market in Sanyuanli where I was distracted from buying a pair of shoes by an orchestra of text tones. Suddenly the market was empty and sure enough as I went outside to see where everyone had gone, dozens of immigration police were waiting, checking passports. In a place where for many African traders, especially Nigerians, visas are particularly difficult to extend, mobility is key.

On a number of occasions, I meet African traders with Chinese partners and children who have lived in Guangzhou for over a decade and are still on a tourist visa. Robert, a Nigerian who owns a luxury clothes shop, has lived in Guangzhou for almost 13 years. He lives with his Chinese wife and three children in a gated community in the city. Robert’s passport says he is a tourist but he argues that despite its business restrictions, it doesn’t bother him.

“You see, I have always been a tourist,” he says. “What does it matter what your passport says? Yes, it would be good for my business if I had a resident visa but China does not like foreigners. It does not like foreigners, but we know that. Therefore we should not complain when they don’t extend or give us good visas. You come to Guangzhou to do business. You go to Vietnam to do business. You don’t go to Guangzhou to come home.”

**Getting used to us**

One morning Robert takes me on a tour of the city in his old blue Mercedes. He takes great pride in letting me sit in the front seat which he has just upholstered himself. As we drive around the outskirts of the city, windows down,
the amount of construction work is remarkable. Cranes, scaffolding and tower blocks dominate the skyline, growing by the minute. “They moved the farmers there you know,” he says. “Many of the farmers were given lots of money and moved into the edge of the city in those flats. I know this because one came into my shop to buy a suit. It was the first one he ever bought.”

Robert is referring to the rapid urbanisation development where rural land owners receive pay-offs to move into urban areas. “When the farmer came into my shop, he was a bit scared,” he recalls. “He told my wife he had never seen so many hei guis [which roughly translates as ‘black ghosts’ or ‘black devils’]. When he saw my children, he could not believe it. He asked my wife if they needed to go to hospital. We laughed a lot but you know many Chinese still think like this. Though in Guangzhou it has changed. Before they used to say we smelted when we got on a bus or laugh at us in the street all the time. Now it is less. I think the Chinese are getting used to us.”

We then take a tour of the centre of the city. Along the highways Robert points out various grey and rather dull offices and high-rise buildings which aren’t quite what they seem. “That one has five churches in it,” he reveals. “There are two Congolese churches and a few Portuguese churches, you know, for the Angolans.” Many African churches in Guangzhou are illegal under Chinese law and so have to conduct their services discreetly from old office blocks and halls.

We drive further and he points at a factory, now derelict and empty. “That was a place where they used to make fake drugs, illegal drugs to sell in Africa. Look at it now. Empty. Even the buildings here are tourists. One minute they are a church and when the police find out, they have to move. One minute it is a factory and now it has to move. The problem is China is too big. The police can’t see everything like people without visas and places without official homes. We Africans are too quick for them.”

The sense of impermanence and transiency runs throughout the African communities in Guangzhou. Some of this is self-made, and some is forced upon them by Chinese authorities and their visa restrictions.

Moving on

As the heavens open and the rain starts to pummel down on his precious Mercedes, Robert winks at me and presses the electric window switch. “Business in China can be good you see. You have to put up with a lot but if you stay in tune with what people want, you can make a lot of money. Prices are becoming too high though, so soon we will move on again. I will take my family to another place. I am a tourist after all!” Robert laughs and lets me out at one of Guangzhou’s new spectacular metro stations. I disappear underground, down the escalator, next to a Ugandan. Despite the heavy presence of many Africans in parts of the city, out in suburbia all eyes are firmly on him.

Later that week I am taken out by David to a nightclub which according to him is known for its ‘African nights’. A few hours after we arrive, at around 4 am, we watch Lo-D, a Nigerian musician, as he raps on stage alongside a Cameroonian rapper from Moscow and a Ghanaian MC. After their performance I talk to the Cameroonian, M-One, about his lifestyle. With his name adorned on his cap, diamond-encrusted watch and flashy outfit, he is clearly doing well for himself.

“I work the circuit between Moscow, Beijing, Guangzhou and other places,” he says. “Europe won’t have me, well, not yet, but Asia and Russia love me.” He goes on to tell me about how he regularly tours all over the Asian continent and shows me pictures of his Russian supermodel wife. “You know in the UK you can be popular but only 50 million people will know you. Here, you can be popular and a billion people know you.”

Mid-conversation we are interrupted by another musician, from Angola. “You know why he’s popular here? Because the younger Chinese, they like people from Africa. They know what Africa has done for China. It is the older ones who are racist but the older ones are not the guys who will buy the music.”

That morning, I stumble back to my hotel with David, slightly tipsy through the bustling crowds of taxi drivers, currency exchange men and African traders. I wake up at around 2 pm in the afternoon to find a note under my door from David. “Bangkok calls. Had to go. Going home for a few hours.”

There is a population of longer-term African residents living in Guangzhou, but the majority are just passing through. They slip beneath the radar of statisticians and economists and defy the easy categorisation journalists crave. With decreasing transport costs, their fluidity and transience offers a glimpse into the economic nomads of the future, where home is on the move.

*Names have been changed to protect interviewees’ identities.
From new players in South Sudan to veteran traders in Soweto, and from migrants and marriages in Guangzhou to gold miners in Ghana, *Trailblazers* collects the best work produced by Chinese and African journalists with Wits China-African Reporting Project grants between 2009 and 2014. Seeking to navigate polarised debates and access the real stories defining China-Africa relations on the ground, this book provides a snapshot of a period of immense change, and a reflection of journalists’ attempts to understand and make sense of these changes.