



Chinese Migrants in Africa: Facts and Fictions from the Agri-Food Sector in Ethiopia and Ghana

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Summary. — This paper makes an empirical and ethnographic contribution to the literature on Chinese migrants in Africa by using five case studies to explore their role in the agri-food sector in Ethiopia and Ghana. We find that the realities of Chinese migrants in this sector matches neither popular media stereotypes of empire building and land grabbing, nor Chinese government narratives of South–South cooperation, technology transfer, and agricultural development. Far from being a “silent army” promoting larger Chinese state objectives, they operate independently and serve no agenda other than their own. Many migrants have little if any contact with the Chinese Embassy or other official Chinese presence in Africa. While none of our informants have received support from the Chinese government, they are nonetheless affected by government regulatory frameworks in African countries and their activities are shaped accordingly. The regulatory policy environment is very different in the two countries, and this has implications for the livelihood strategies of Chinese migrants. While the impacts of their presence on local development are modest overall, these impacts do appear to be positive in the sense that they are creating economic opportunities, both for themselves and for local people.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The role of Chinese migrants in Africa—when viewed from the perspective of the agri-food sector—is poorly researched and understood. A micro-level view suggests, however, that it does not fit neatly into Western media stereotypes (land grabbing, empire building) or Chinese government discourses (South–South cooperation and technology transfer). This is not a state-driven phenomenon, but rather a story of individuals. This paper aims to make an empirical contribution by investigating—through five case studies—the role of Chinese migrants in the agri-food sector in two African countries—Ethiopia and Ghana. In so doing, we hope to challenge some prevailing narratives surrounding Chinese migrants and China’s role in Africa, and to explore the implications for local development in these countries.

2. METHODOLOGY

Our research goal was to look beyond official Chinese government proclamations, as well as the dramatic allegations that characterize some of the media coverage of Chinese investment in Africa, to investigate what is actually happening on the ground. The only way to understand fully is to engage closely with migrants through individual case studies to examine their activities and motivations, their networks, the reasons they ended up in Africa and in the food sector, and overall to try to ascertain the impacts of their activities on local development.

The main methodologies used in both countries were semi-structured interviews and participant observation. A total of 45 interviews were conducted in Ethiopia, 43 of which were done during four periods of fieldwork between November 2013 and December 2014, complemented with another two interviews with informants based in China. Informants included officials from the Ethiopian Ministry of Agriculture;

staff of the China-Ethiopia Agricultural Technology Demonstration Centre (ATDC); instructors at Alage Agricultural College; Chinese farmers, hotel managers, restaurant owners, entrepreneurs, local vegetable and meat vendors; and researchers at the Ethiopian Institute of Agricultural Research. In Ghana, 27 interviews were conducted during fieldwork in December 2013. Interviewees included Chinese farmers, supermarket owners, pesticide salespeople, staff of the Chinese Embassy, local farmers, local vegetable vendors, and staff of the Ghanaian Ministry of Agriculture. In addition to these longer interviews, there was also a much larger number of shorter interactions with Chinese, Ethiopians, and Ghanaians involved in the production, sale, and consumption of agricultural commodities. Interviews were conducted in Chinese, English, and Amharic depending on the preference of the informant and ease of communication.

In Ethiopia, Chinese migrants are involved in running restaurants, several retail food businesses, and some small farms. There is one Chinese company that has recently acquired land to grow rice and vegetables, and at least one other that is planning to invest in agriculture. In Ghana, the scope of food-related activities that Chinese migrants are involved in is much broader due to a more lenient regulatory environment (discussed in section 6). This includes running farms, restaurants, retail food shops, and supermarkets as well as input supply firms. There are also Chinese companies that grow some of their own produce for their Chinese staff, and Chinese food-processing companies producing snacks and

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drinks for the local market. Given the larger number of food sector businesses in Ghana, this paper only profiles a small number of them. Furthermore, the focus of this paper is on farms, shops, and other enterprises involved in marketing food and agricultural products, and hence there is only passing mention here of firms that are growing food solely for their own staff needs.

In each country, research involved multinational research teams. In Ghana, the team included two Chinese researchers fluent in English, a Chinese speaking researcher from the UK, and a Ghanaian university professor fluent in English. In Ethiopia, the team was comprised of a Chinese speaking American and an Ethiopian researcher from a government institute fluent in English and Amharic. The teams attempted to locate Chinese farmers and migrants involved in other parts of the food industry by triangulating between Investment Agency lists, regional tours conducted by local research assistants and *ad hoc* investigations, based on snowball sampling.

3. BACKGROUND: UNDERSTANDING CHINESE MIGRATION TO AFRICA

China is playing an influential role in the development path of African countries and its influence on the continent will continue to grow in tandem with rising trade and aid flows (Amanor & Chichava, 2016). Most of the literature on China–Africa relations focuses on state-level cooperation, as well as Chinese state-owned firms, which operate in tandem with state institutions and policy (Gu, Zhang, Mukwereza, & Amanor, 2016). However, there are also large numbers of Chinese migrants in Africa who are participating in local economies in various ways. What these people are doing, and the influence they are having on local development, is only recently beginning to be addressed in the literature (e.g., French, 2014; Mohan, Lampert, Tan-Mullins, & Chang, 2014), but the role of Chinese migrants in the agri-food sector is a neglected area. This section draws on the literature to explore what we know about Chinese migration trends in Africa, and to highlight the gaps.

(a) Migration trends and data gaps

The outward flow of Chinese migrants is a function of changes in China's political economic context. For the first three decades following the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, China's migration was tightly controlled. People either left the country to work on state-backed projects in developing countries abroad, or they left illegally (Fielding, 2015). In order to foster diplomatic relations with newly independent African states, Mao sent an estimated 150,000 workers and technicians to Africa to participate in agriculture, technology, and infrastructure projects, the vast majority of whom returned to China after completing their work (Park, 2009, p. 2). The 1978 reform and opening up period initially saw the gradual legal migration of researchers and students to Western universities and the illegal migration of largely poor people from Southeast China to North America and Western Europe. As economic growth continued, migration flows increased too and took on a global character as people moved to other parts of Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Although Chinese people have been going to Africa on state-to-state cooperation projects since the inception of the PRC in 1949 (Amanor & Chichava, 2016), it is only

since the beginning of the 21st century that mainland Chinese have begun to migrate to Africa independently in significant numbers (Fielding, 2015).

Chinese migration to Ethiopia and Ghana has increased significantly in recent years, as Chinese companies have expanded their presence in the mining, construction, road building, hydropower, electricity, railroad, telecommunications, manufacturing, and other sectors. Data on the number of Chinese migrants in Africa are incomplete and unreliable, and these two countries are no exception. A source in the Ethiopian Embassy in Beijing indicated that there are 35,000–40,000 Chinese people living in Ethiopia.¹ A contact in the Chinese Embassy in Addis Ababa put that number at 20,000.²

As for Ghana, Mohan *et al.* (2014, pp. 20–21) estimate Chinese migrant numbers at anywhere between 7,000 and 20,000. They quote another source that puts this figure at between 6,000 and 10,000 (Marfaing & Thiel, 2011). However, *The Guardian* reported that 4,592 illegal Chinese gold miners were deported in June–July 2013 alone,³ which indicates that the total number of Chinese migrants in Ghana is considerably higher than the other estimates. Previous studies of Chinese migrations to Ghana also chart the flow of people coming from Hong Kong (or through Hong Kong from mainland China) from the 1950s to 1970s, often setting up textile mills (Ho, 2008). Movements of Chinese migrants are not unidirectional in time or space, with migrants moving between countries and also splitting their time between countries in a highly flexible way. Additional factors include porous borders within Africa, corruption, and ineffectiveness within agencies responsible for border control and immigration. For these reasons, accurate figures on the Chinese presence in Africa are difficult to obtain and constantly in flux (Park, 2012).

Since the promulgation of China's Going Out Strategy in 1999, the Chinese government has been actively promoting the outward flow of companies and people, including in the agricultural sector. This has taken the form of general encouragement to Chinese companies that they should invest in African agriculture,⁴ as well as state-to-state cooperation projects that bring in Chinese companies⁵ (Gu *et al.*, 2016). There have also been increasing numbers of Chinese researchers and civil servants recommending that Chinese state agencies do more to facilitate the “going out” of Chinese companies into African agriculture (Jing & Li, 2011). And there have been reports of studies for the Chinese government that African agriculture could provide employment for up to 1 million Chinese laborers, and aid China's food security (Bezlova, 2009).

Several studies over the past decade have begun to look at the nature of Chinese migration across different African countries. These have given great insights into the diversity of actors, how they engage with local communities, as well as the push and pull factors which brought them to Africa in the first place (Mohan *et al.*, 2014; Guo Chatelard & Chu, 2014; Bräutigam, 2011). Between them, they show how Chinese migrants already engage in numerous forms of business, ranging from construction to trading and healthcare. Many of the migrants who have set up small businesses in Africa originally came over on large state-to-state projects, but family connections are now becoming more important, both in terms of bringing people out in the first place, as well as the functioning of businesses over time (Mohan *et al.*, 2014).

There are however very few studies focusing specifically on Chinese migrants' engagement in the agri-food sector in African countries. A notable exception is recent work on Chinese agricultural engagements in Zambia (Guo Chatelard & Chu, 2014), which has a particular focus on individual, private

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