

China's Second Continent. How a million migrants are building a new empire in Africa

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The provocative title and thesis of Howard French's book is ample evidence of the allure geopolitical narratives have in simplifying what would otherwise be a complex portrait of African-Chinese relations. Despite the title and his own attempt to live up to the title, French has actually written a rich and nuanced book. His long term experience in both China and around the African continent makes him among the better qualified of non-African journalists to cover the topic. His strongest contributions are the portraits he provides of the individual Chinese entrepreneurs whose experiences and relationships, as he argues in the introduction, have been neglected in discussions about Sino-African relationships. The stories he collects from his year-long whirlwind tour of Africa portray hyper-entrepreneurs, some lacking prior international experience, and some knowing no language other than Chinese. Through a combination of what French identifies to be some parts skill and some parts luck, many (but not all) have managed to set themselves up in a range of industries from timber exploitation to manufacturing. These rags-to-riches stories are set within an atmosphere of "eating bitterness," wherein Chinese migrants strive by working in environments that many (but not all) expressly do not like, and do business with people towards whom they frequently express negative sentiments. French considers many of them to be China's "lost generation," those whose opportunities for education were disrupted by the Cultural Revolution, and who were unable to compete successfully in the post-reform economy. As French points out, "huge numbers of Chinese had not boarded the up escalator, or at least they did not feel they had," (240) and Africa presents itself as a second chance, a place of supposedly limitless opportunity. The pursuit of these opportunities is fragmented, rather than organized, and we find different Chinese actors working at cross-purposes.

French, however, disrupts what starts as a detailed and rather nuanced portrait of the new Chinese migrants in Africa (notwithstanding some stereotyped colorfulness rooted in the limited time spent with many) into a cautionary tale about how these migrants are “building a new empire.” The narrative arc of the book turns what was probably already a foregone conclusion into an epiphany midway through the book that what the author “was witnessing in Africa is the higgledy-piggledy cobbling together of a new Chinese realm of interest... the beginnings of a new empire” (170). To his credit, French’s “empire” is not the crude geostrategic fantasy of an imperial project directed from Beijing. He writes that there is “little hint of a grand or even deliberate scheme [to colonize Africa], but in the end, that’s not so important...it is outcomes that count” (264). He makes an argument about the intrinsic dynamics of rising empires, challenging Chinese state discourses which, on the basis of the historical fact that China never established territorial colonies in Africa, emphatically deny that China is (or could ever be) imperial. As he points out, migrants and settlers can unleash processes which stretch the limits of claims to practice “non-interference.” French rightly suggests that “the nature of empire has changed dramatically over time depending on the circumstances,” meaning the absence of colonialism does not mean the absence of imperial relationships.

French, however, weakens the impact of an argument that China is not immune to such dynamics by pushing too strongly an analogy of contemporary Chinese migrants with early European colonial settlers. He also draws analogies to the 19th century territorial expansion of the United States, titling a section “Manifest Destiny.” On the one hand, he is not off the mark to argue that many Chinese actors do evince “imperialist” views of Africa. The people he reports on often speak of African landscapes and markets as open, virgin and underexploited; revealing themselves in turn, as French points out, to be somewhat naive about local histories and social contexts. On the one hand, some Chinese informants tell French they are optimistic about the assumed inevitability of economic development in the African countries they now call home. On the other hand, the same informants will say they are pessimistic about the capacity of Africans themselves to develop. The implication seems to be that only foreigners, and the Chinese in particular, are capable of realising that development. Given how much celebratory discourse in Africa and China about Sino-African cooperation emphasizes a break from the paternalism of Western actors, French is justified in pointing out that many Chinese actors are not innocent of paternalistic attitudes in their engagements with Africa. French’s book should remind scholars of African-Chinese relations that one should be equally critical of narratives of

Chinese non-imperialism as they are of simplistic narratives of Chinese neo-imperialism.

There is a crucial difference, however, that should be recognized between an argument that Chinese engage in imperial practices and discourses and an argument that Chinese are creating a singular “empire.” The colonial white settler comparison for the Chinese is not unfounded, but it overlooks the massive history of non-European migration, which was in fact as significant, or even more significant to the European colonial empires. These settlers themselves had their ‘manifest destinies,’ and were both beneficiaries and marginal agents in empire. Lebanese and Indian communities do appear in the book, as well as contemporary migrant entrepreneurs from places like Romania, but they remain peripheral to the *Chinese* story. Astoundingly, the historical experience of the global Chinese diaspora is also scarcely mentioned in French’s book. The American characters which appear in the book provide comedic relief as hapless Foreign Service workers with nothing to show for themselves, but the absence of any discussion of the US military presence in Africa is glaring. In other words, there are many levels of historical and contemporary context in which the Chinese presence is embedded which French has to exclude in order to make his argument. Africa may be one of Chinese *capital*’s “second continent(s),” but to define it as *China*’s Second Continent seductively implies an argument about a speculative geopolitical future that distracts attention from what would otherwise be a good argument about China’s entry into a global post-colonial structure of inequality which disadvantages Africa. China is not so much replacing whatever came before as much as it is altering an already changing landscape. This reality is in fact evident throughout French’s account. Various (non-Chinese) foreign actors enter the story, but he writes as if the rise of a Chinese “sphere of influence” in Africa is “*the new empire*” in Africa.

The narrative aside, French provides a rich glimpse of the subjectivities of individual Chinese. African subjectivities and perspectives, on the other hand, are limited to representatives of civil society organizations. We therefore learn less about the people who directly work and interact with the Chinese. We do learn about prevalent concerns about the failure of African governments to govern foreign capital in the interests of Africans rather than vice versa, especially over the long term. This is a story which predates the Chinese, but one in which the Chinese are now an active participant. In the end, French less convincingly makes this a story about the rise of a Chinese empire. One can only hope that readers will look beyond his title and conclusion, or at least take it with a critical grain of measured skepticism.

About the reviewer

Derek Sheridan is a PhD candidate in the Anthropology Department at Brown University. His research is broadly concerned with the politics and ethics of epistemology and knowledge production, vernacular theories of empire and transnationalism, interpersonal ethics and social semiotics. He has recently completed dissertation fieldwork in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania on the relationship between Chinese migrant entrepreneurs and their Tanzanian associates.