Contextualizing Chinese Migration to Africa

Jonathan Sullivan and Jing Cheng.

This is a pre-pub version of a paper forthcoming (2018) in Journal of Asian and African Studies

Introduction

Who are "the Chinese" in Africa? As China's engagement with African countries intensifies and diversifies, and the size of the Chinese population in Africa increases, these questions have elicited a lot of attention. Some of the answers proffered are problematic, based on troubling arguments, uninformed stereotypes and an undifferentiated notion of "the Chinese". One popular book describes Hu Jintao's visit to Yaoande in 2002 as a triumph because "millions of Chinese soldiers armed with only cheap goods had already conquered the place" (Michel and Beuret, 2009: 115). Another well-known title invokes Chinese migrants' purported economic prowess in terms of "a capacity for self-sacrifice, nose for business, ability to adapt to surroundings, talent for cutting costs, tendency to save money [and] discreet nature" (Cardenal and Araújo, 2013: 16). Media depictions regularly invoke negative stereotypes to describe and explain the Chinese presence in Africa (Mawdsley, 2008). In reality, there is no evidence that China is "seeking colonies, using prisoners as cheap labour or any of the other lurid accusations made against "the Chinese" in Africa" (Taylor, 2014: 121). Instead, Hirono and Suzuki argue that debates about China in Africa "reflect deeply rooted western anxieties that their traditional dominance in Africa is about to be overthrown by a non-western power" (2014: 455). Compared to the huge interest in recent Chinese *migration* across the world, relatively little work focuses on Chinese *migrants*. One of the aims of this paper is to add texture to depictions

of the Chinese migrant experience, specifically in the context of the movement of Chinese people to countries in Africa. What motivates Chinese to move to African countries? What are their fears and hopes? A second motivation for this article is to investigate the mediating role of communication technologies. How do Chinese migrants use technology to express, identify, and facilitate their moves and lives in Africa? And what do the digital communications of Chinese people at various stages in the migration process reveal about their motivations and preoccupations? **Our major argument is that depictions of Chinese migrations to Africa are erroneously coloured by China's state-level engagement with Africa. In our view, it is a mistake to use state-led activity as the primary lens to view Chinese migrations to Africa, much less to perceive Chinese migrants as agents of the Chinese state. This article contextualizes Chinese migration to Africa by refocusing attention on migrants themselves. We proceed in four stages. First, we set out the basis for conventional views about "the Chinese in Africa" before setting out an alternative way of looking at migrants. We then set up the empirical study by discussing the intervening role of technology in the migration process. Finally, we present evidence on the Chinese migrations by analysing textual contributions to digital forums.**

The Chinese engagement with Africa

Chinese state actors are active across virtually all economic sectors from extractive primary industries to real estate, telecoms and agriculture. In the 2000s China committed $62 billion in loans, $12 billion more than the World Bank. By 2012, trade between China and African countries reached $200 billion, more than Africa enjoyed with the EU and US. Yet, Beijing has also been criticized for supporting repressive regimes such as those in Zimbabwe and Equatorial Guinea, refusing to use its influence to intervene in the humanitarian disaster at Darfur, and for engaging in "neo-colonialism" (Campbell, 2008; Large, 2008; Taylor and Xiao,

2009). China is a substantial consumer of African resources (oil, copper, coal, diamonds, gold, bauxite, iron ore, timber) and it has invested heavily in physical infrastructure (ports, roads, airports, railways, hospitals, bridges, dams, mines, power plants, refineries, stadia, government buildings etc.) across the continent. Beijing is also interested in generating markets for Chinese goods, building diplomatic support and fostering "soft power" through the expansion of international media operations. China's engagement includes sustained participation in UN peacekeeping missions in Mali and South Sudan (Lanteigne, 2014), the construction of a naval base in Djibouti, anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden and plans to incorporate African economies into the Belt and Road Initiative. The scale and intensity of these initiatives have focused most attention on the intentions of the Chinese state.

The number of Chinese citizens residing in Africa has also increased substantially in the past two decades, reaching around one million (Sun, 2014: 28). Several high-profile popular publications exaggerate migrant numbers and highlight conflicts with receiving populations (Cardenal and Araújo 2014; Michel and Beuret, 2009). In western media coverage, the diversity of Chinese people's engagement with Africa is reduced to national or ethnic descriptors, i.e. "the Chinese" (Mawdsley, 2008). Even in Chinese academic literature, there has been a tendency to reduce the China-Africa migration experience to macro-level statistics (as critiqued by Li, 2012). The increasing number of Chinese living in Africa has prompted negative reactions in some local media outlets, and has led to protests and political opposition in Zambia, action by trade unions in South Africa, and business organizations in Uganda and Ghana. In some cases, notably Zambia, anti-Chinese sentiment has been instrumentalized by local politicians (Larmer and Fraser, 2007; Mohan and Tan-Mullins 2009), as has happened in other locations experiencing increases in Chinese migration such as the Russian Far East (Alexseev, 2003; Sullivan and Renz, 2010) and the South Pacific (Shie, 2007; Yang, 2009). Chinese actors have been criticised for "unfair competition, smuggling, inferior quality, illegal

immigration, ruining local industries, taking local jobs, and simply invading foreign countries by virtue of sheer numbers" (Nyiri 2011: 149). Some popular responses, for example Australian media coverage of Chinese engagement with islands in the South Pacific (Sullivan and Renz, 2012), invoke the "semantics of spread" and "images of expansion, takeover and appropriation" redolent of racist, "Yellow Peril" narratives (Mayer, 2013: 6). In Africa, further criticisms relate to the behaviours of Chinese migrants, mirroring similar class-based discourses around the "quality" (suzhi 素质) and "civilization" (wenming 文明) of rural-to-urban migrants in China itself (Kipnis, 2006). Chinese economic activity has been criticised for limiting employment opportunities and knowledge exchange with Africans, and the failure of migrants to assimilate into host communities (Carmody, 2011; Lee, 2009). We do not claim that negative portrayals are always unwarranted. But in order to better understand "the Chinese in Africa" we argue that moving beyond the level of state interactions and an undifferentiated notion of Chinese migrants as an homogenous bloc is crucial (Postel, 2017).

Disaggregating "the Chinese in Africa"

"The Chinese" is a term that masks substantial diversity across Chinese people working and residing in the 51 African countries with which the PRC has diplomatic relations (Hsu, 2007). The characteristics of Chinese citizens in Africa must be disaggregated by several variables, including provincial origin (sending provinces in China are increasingly diverse), length of time in-country, class, occupation and age (Park, 2013). There is a distinction to be made between Chinese employed in the diplomatic service, professionals working on government aid schemes, contracted labourers working on state infrastructure projects and private entrepreneurs seeking economic opportunities (Driessen, 2015; 2016). Private Chinese entrepreneurs are involved in diverse activities in Africa from global telecommunications firms to the low-end globalization of individual

"suitcase multinationals." They are involved in providing health care in Equatorial Guinea (Esteban, 2009), small-scale "Chinese shops" (百货; loja do chinês) in Cape Verde (Haugen and Carling, 2005) and Namibia (Dobler, 2009), the wholesale trade in Ghana (Giese, 2013) etc. There are Chinese traders of plastic toys and trinkets, unbranded mobile phones (山寨机), clothing and lingerie. Some Chinese are groundsheet hawkers in local markets, others the owners of general stores, restaurants and lodging houses. Individuals own small factories, mines and logging concessions, raise pigs and poultry, grow wheat and cotton, or provide healthcare and dentistry. The reach of Chinese entrepreneurs across Africa is widespread, encompassing some of the most outwardly unpromising locales "where profit margins are very low to begin with and supply chains are weak" (Gu, 2009: 574). With this continent-wide presence, Mohan argues that "Chinese migrants are the face of China in Africa and it is in Chinese stores, herbalists and restaurants that most Africans encounter China" (2008: 162). In some areas with concentrations of Chinese people, an "ethnic economy" made up of restaurants specialising in Chinese cuisine, karaoke (KTV), Chinese medicine shops, supermarkets selling Chinese ingredients and even brothels with Chinese sex workers serving Chinese customers, are a conspicuous sign of Chinese migration (Mohan et al 2014: 89).

Such concentrations of Chinese activity may help explain over-estimates of the degree of cohesion in Chinese migrant communities in Africa. Economist Dambisa Moyo argues that Chinese people in Africa "all pull together, public or private, under one unifying force with a single agenda: the betterment of China" (2012: 5). Cardenal and Araújo similarly identify an "exclusive web of intra-Chinese contacts", which they argue provides Chinese migrants with implied unfair economic advantages (2014: 16). Yet fieldwork studies report little evidence of such unity or coordination. Instead there are strained relations among newer migrants caused by economic competition (Esteban, 2009)

and manifest in guarded social interactions (Xiao, 2015). There are divisions based on class, occupation and geographical provenance and the perception of homogeneity generated by concentrations of Chinese restaurants and Chinese characters belies the lack of common feeling among many Chinese in Africa. As French (2014) reports, contrary to the stereotype that "the Chinese stick together", Chinese migrants' decisions on where to settle are often deliberately made to avoid their compatriots.

The imposition of non-variegated views onto all African encounters with "the Chinese" is similarly untenable (Sautman and Yan, 2009). The idea that African countries and communities are passive subjects is challenged by observations of multiple intersections where African entrepreneurs exercise agency in their engagement with Chinese businesses (Bodomo, 2010). Mohan and Lampert demonstrate how Ghanaian and Nigerian entrepreneurs play a direct role in "encouraging the Chinese presence by sourcing not only consumer goods but also partners, workers and capital goods from China" (2013: 101). Similarly, Brautigam's work on Nigeria reveals "an African-induced process of chain migration and investment" (2003: 103). Despite the continent-wide presence of "China shops," Taylor argues that "Chinese traders are not flooding the African market with cheap Chinese goods, rather it is African actors (many of them based in Guangdong) who are facilitating the trade" (2014: 114). A substantial number of African entrepreneurs and traders have reversed the migration flow to establish themselves in China (Mathews and Yang, 2012).

Many Chinese migrants arrive in African countries with little capital, scant knowledge of the country and lacking relevant language skills (Huynh et al., 2010), tempted by economic opportunities, better quality of life and comparatively liberal

immigration laws in receiving countries.[1] Driessen's fieldwork among Chinese migrants in Ethiopia suggests that the decision to seek work in Africa is the result of anxiety about being left behind by China's competitive economy or due to financial imperatives she describes as akin to being a "mortgage slave" (2015). In such cases, the identity of the receiving country is irrelevant to migrants who have very specific material incentives, often including a timeframe in which to compile sufficient funds to return to China. Haugen and Carling (2005) similarly found that family and acquaintance networks and sheer coincidence were the main drivers of migration to Cape Verde. Sacrificing time and comfort to save for a future unequivocally based in China, the migrants Driessen studied viewed Africa as "a transitional space rather than a destination, and their time spent there as liminal" (2016: 2). For the "proletarian migrants" identified by Kuang (2008), the meaning is literal in the sense that they are using Africa as a springboard to other destinations like Europe and North America. Since many migrations are undertaken by individuals, with no connection, or desire to be connected, to the state, who move to Africa on the basis of private decisions to seek economic and other personal opportunities, the key to a more nuanced understanding of Chinese migrations to Africa is to contextualize migrants' motives.

Technology and Chinese migration

The digital behaviors and online communities of Chinese present and prospective migrants to Africa, with the exception of Xiao's (2015) study of entrepreneurs in Nigeria and Shen's (2009) analysis of attitudes towards Africa in Chinese cyberspace, have not received attention. This neglect is despite the acknowledged role of communication technologies and digital tools in

---

[1] We thank an anonymous reviewer for reminding us of the relative ease with which Chinese migrants can secure visas, for example in South Africa where permanent residence status is attainable after 5 years.

the lives of international migrants and Diaspora groups more generally (Oh, 2016; Oiarzabal and Reips, 2012). Research on rural-to-urban domestic migration in China has demonstrated the key role they play on a practical, emotional and psychological level, allowing dislocated families to keep in touch and giving newly arrived migrants a pathway to assimilating into urban communities and transforming their own identities (Qiu, 2007; Wallis, 2013). In the context of Chinese migrations to Africa, the utility of studying communications technologies and digital platforms is twofold. First, digital tools form part of the assemblage of contemporary Chinese migration. Despite a tendency to see digital communications as disconnected from the physical world, cyberspaces and digital platforms are an integrated part of people's lives (Sullivan, 2014). We argue for treating engagements with technology as something "real" and seek to question their role in the migration process. For instance, does the emergence of relevant cyberspaces enable Chinese migration to Africa by facilitating information exchange, networking opportunities and support? Does it facilitate migrants' conception and narration of their own migration experiences? Second, digital spaces used by migrants provide a rich and unexplored data source for investigating migrants' motivations, preoccupations and emotions. In short, they have the potential to reveal candid snapshots of the China-Africa migration experience at various stages of the migration process. A further incidental but useful contribution is to add some texture to the story of Chinese migration to Africa, contrary to deindividuated accounts of "the Chinese" in the aggregate.

There is an abundance of Internet platforms used by present and prospective Chinese migrants to Africa. The main platforms include online discussion forums (like Tianya 天涯 and Baidu 百度), instant messaging services (QQ and Weixin 微信), microblogging (weibo 微博), and social networking sites (Qzone, renren 人人, douban 豆瓣). Baidu Tieba (百度帖吧), a discussion forum run by China's leading search engine, features dozens of forums focusing on "life in Africa". The "African Bar" (非洲吧, *Feizhouba*), has 38,786 registered members,

8,099 topics and 207,189 posts.[2] There are also separate 'bars' or forums for single African countries. Forums covering South Africa, Angola and Nigeria, three major receiving countries in Africa, have thousands of members and posts in the hundreds of thousands. The "Go to Africa" (去非洲, *Qufeizhou*) website is the largest specialized communication platform with 104,573 registered members. It provides information on job vacancies, visas and Chinese enterprises, with groups built around provincial origin (同乡 *tongxiang*) and occupation. In addition, instant Messaging platforms like QQ and Weixin are essentially private spaces that allow people to maintain communication with their networks. There are hundreds of QQ groups for discussions on Africa, many of which have several hundred members. These groups can be categorized into communication interest groups coalescing around trade, travel, recruitment, news and lifestyle. Search functions can identify users in different geographic locations in Africa. Many Weixin groups require an invitation from an administrator and are based around acquaintances and social relations who distribute information, exchange opinions, organize events, and discuss issues. Xiao's (2015) analysis of a Weixin group based in Nigeria found Chinese migrants sharing information to negotiate bureaucracy and corruption, and as a conduit to transnational Chinese communities. For many Chinese in Africa, lacking connections with formal Chinese institutions, excluded from established Diasporic communities and host populations, digital platforms provide connections to families in China and compensation for scarce local social capital.

Research design

Our investigation proceeds in four stages. First, we provide a broad overview of Chinese migrants' use of internet forums at two different stages of the migration process. To do this we

---

[2] Available at: http://tieba.baidu.com/f?ie=utf-8&kw=%E9%9D%9E%E6%B4%B2%E5%90%A7&fr=search&red_tag=i2670824196. Accessed January 9, 2018.

analysed 1900 threads on three major forums across the different Chinese platforms.[3] Second, we seek to identify the preoccupations and the ways in which prospective Chinese migrants to Africa reveal their motivations, expectations and concerns. In this stage of the analysis we randomly select 600 top interactive threads on Baidu Tieba (百度贴吧) and Tianya Forum (天涯论坛). Third, we repeat the same process, but concentrate on the conversations of Chinese migrants presently based in Africa selected from the Africa Bar (非洲吧) on Baidu Tieba. Using these two samples we aim to differentiate the attitudes and behaviours of prospective and current migrants, in anticipation of potential differences. We planned to include further analysis of past migrants, i.e. Chinese who had once been in Africa, but our pilot study revealed that this category of migrant was too small and scattered to provide a coherent sample. Finally, in the fourth stage of the analysis, we purposely selected a forum dedicated to the experiences of Chinese working for a Chinese multinational in Africa. Specifically, we choose a forum used by employees of the telecom company Huawei on Tianya Forum, namely *Huawei Shijie* (华为世界). Employees of Chinese SOEs and multinational companies constitute a distinct cohort of Chinese migrants in Africa (Alden and Davies, 2006), but research on these migrants' attitudes is very limited. In assessing three types of Chinese migrants (present and prospective individual migrants and multinational company employees), we aim to contribute a more complex and humanized picture of "the Chinese in Africa."

Step one of the empirical study was to analyse a substantial number of forums in Chinese on Chinese websites, locating relevant threads using keyword search. Through our content analysis of 1900 threads across the three major forums we identified five broad

---

[3] Feizhou Bar 非洲吧 on Baidu Tieba 百度贴吧
http://tieba.baidu.com/f?kw=%E9%9D%9E%E6%B4%B2&ie=utf-8 ; Huawei World 华为世界 on Tianya Forum 天涯论坛 http://bbs.tianya.cn/list-516-1.shtml ; BBS on Qufeizhou 去非洲网 http://bbs.qufeizhou.com/forum.php.

discussion themes. The first, dealing with business information includes professional intelligence, announcements of cooperation opportunities (合作) and trade transactions. The second, which we label employment, includes enterprises posting job offers, individual jobseeker notices, and discussion of work conditions and salary. The third category deals with lifestyles, with discussion of different dimensions of migrant experiences in Africa, including personal narratives, tales of romantic or sexual encounters, health issues and food. Fourth, travel experiences and impressions of Africa, with reflections on the "true Africa", perceptions of African people, as well as travel recommendations and photos and seeking companions. The fifth category concerns the practical aspects of migration, including information about visas and bureaucracy, where to find accommodation, university application procedures, flights and hotels. Several forums include discrete sections for "newcomers" (新人报道 *xinren baodao)*, but we don't include them as a separate group as the discussion in these forums is already incorporated in our five categories. "Newcomer" discussion threads also tend, unsurprisingly, to be dominated by requests for short-term practical information. To distinguish between prospective and current migrants, we used metadata attached to forums and threads combined with user identification. Table 1 categorizes forum functions for present and prospective migrants across the five discussion themes noted above.

Table 1: Forum functions

	Present Migrants	Prospective migrants
Business	Trade information; Offer/seek collaboration; Sell/buy shops; Sell/buy second-hand goods	Look for collaboration opportunities; Seek trade information
Employment	Look for jobs; Swap enterprise job information	Look for possibilities to work in Africa; Ask about work conditions, salaries
Life experience	Perceptions of local people; Life stories; Love and emotions; Health care and security	Ask about African social opportunities; Discuss local conditions
Travel	Share photos; Make Recommendations; Discuss perceptions; Seek companions	Ask about places to visit and travel conditions
Migration	Share experiences; Visa practicalities; Information about language requirements and study	How to apply for visas; Seek advice on contracts; Compare conditions

Prospective migrants

Online discussion forums for prospective Chinese migrants to Africa are abundant. They provide a venue for people planning a move to seek insights, in the form of specific contextual information and personal experiences that may be inaccessible to them among physical world networks or even elsewhere online. Assessing discussions among prospective migrants allows us a window onto the drivers of migration and the "process of becoming" (Xiang, 2014: 196). Prior research suggests that many Chinese are motivated to relocate to Africa to improve their economic circumstances, often perceiving in Africa an opportunity to carve out a niche that doesn't exist in uber-competitive China (Driessen, 2016), consistent with theories of transnational migration (Castles and Davidson, 2000). Financial concerns are a very strong preoccupation on the forums we analysed. However, studies of migration in many contexts suggest more complex factors in migrants' decisionmaking. It is often not a simple question of going where wages are highest, and the existence of some form of social capital, for example in the form of family ties, is often a factor (Pieke et al., 2004). Fieldwork studies in Africa show that many Chinese entrepreneurs prefer to solicit workers from among family members (Gu, 2009). All of these factors are evident in the comments of a young Chinese woman working in a small foreign trade company in China:

> My aunt is now in Chad in Africa and she would like me to go there to work. She said, the annual income there is more than the sum of several years' at home

The idea that Africa is a place of *moderate* economic opportunity is widespread across prospective migrants' forum contributions. In his research on domestic migrants within China, Xiang (2014) argues that "would-be migrants" have a particular psychological state in which "waiting to go abroad" (等着出国) dominates their present existence. Building on Xiang's idea of "displacement of the present", Driessen describes "transplanting one's life to Africa" as a

method of "jumping towards the future" (2016: 2). This sentiment is pervasive among prospective migrants, as this comment from a recent university graduate illustrates:

> My plan is that I will go to Africa for several years and then come back to sit for the civil service exam, or set up a business with the money. Anyway, I feel it is so hard to earn a living at home.

Driessen also identifies migration decisions prompted by angst (焦虑) which she defines as "a lingering fear of lagging behind in a fierce competition for resources (e.g. wealth, jobs and housing)" (2016: 2; for an analysis of firms' behaviour in the same vein see Shen, 2015). Research on Chinese Millennials (those born in the 1990s, 九零后) suggests that this cohort, who have grown up as only children under conditions of economic take-off, is particularly riven by angst (Fish, 2015). This comes through very strongly on prospective migrant forums, and is as much existential as economic. As another young university graduate writes:

> I am under great pressure [in my job]….I don't know whether I am not confident in what I am doing or I want to do in this life. I feel like going to Africa. Can anyone give me some advice?

A large number of posts reflect Millennials' discontent with life in China and aspirations to start a new life in Africa. But these sentiments are frequently detached from any knowledge of conditions or opportunities in Africa, which for many prospective migrants has an indefinable allure. One university student comments:

> I have been thinking about going to Africa. I know I will have to give up something, and it may also be dangerous out there. But for a change, I must go. How can I go there step by step?

This student's posts reveal a sense of economic optimism about Africa compared to China, but also hints that is a feeling rooted in ignorance and naivety. The notion that going to Africa is a means to circumventing China's harsh economic realities is common. But Africa is also frequently conceived as a place of escape to, a dream-like location in which to seek a life reboot. This recent divorcé illustrates the escapism that Africa represents:

> When I was young I had fantasy about going to Africa, but it stopped when I got married and settled down to a career. Now I don't feel like continuing the business at home any longer. I have no idea what to do. All of sudden I think of Africa.

While many prospective migrants perceive opportunities in Africa, they still yearn to do it via the security of a job with an SOE or privately owned multinational. For those lacking in financial or social capital (in the form of family connections or *guanxi* 关系), going to Africa is not feasible and very risky without the security of guaranteed employment. Therefore, of all the many inquiries for information, a substantial proportion concern how to get a job in an SOE, the application process, qualifications and salary.

> By what means can I go to Africa? Is it ok if I do not have any acquaintances? Are there many state-owned companies?

For small-scale entrepreneurs, exchanging the Chinese business environment for Africa means the loss of embedded guanxi networks, and many threads represent attempts to address this loss. Posters reach out to Chinese counterparts, soliciting contacts and trying to establish links before arriving in Africa. Comments like the one from this entrepreneur in the shoe and clothing industry also illustrate the ad hoc, last minute nature of some migrations:

> Does anyone work in Togo? How is the business environment there? The more detailed information you provide, the better. I will go there soon, and would like to know some Chinese friends.

Many people seek specific information regarding the business environment and market opportunities. Gu's fieldwork among Chinese entrepreneurs in Africa suggests that firms mostly gained information from friends and personal connections and by doing their own research. The large number of related queries we discovered on discussion forums suggest further that "market research" is occurring online informally and in unsystematic ways as the following comment illustrates:

> I just want to know if the wig market is good? Our family has a wig factory, and would like to explore market overseas.

And yet, once in place personal relationships and networks in China can be used "to source goods, technology, labour and capital from China, which in return creates competitive advantages" and facilitates further migration (Mohan et al., 2014: 78).

> I am going to Tanzania soon. Could you please tell me what I should pay attention to. I am quite worried about whether I can adjust to the work environment there. How did you handle it? Is there any special local custom?

A number of posters talk about state media representations of Africa, which tend to emphasize the positive, and the incompleteness of information from these channels. They use online forums to inquire about the "real" situation in Africa, exemplifying the role that informal online sources take assume under an authoritarian information regime (Sullivan, 2012). A substantial proportion of queries concern law and order, along with discussion of tales of violence, robbery and extortion. Concerns about law and order are common. There is a tendency to think about Africa in dichotomous terms like chaos and stability, reflecting discourse that is highly salient in China itself. Health concerns are common, more likely to be posted by women and to concern future child-bearing:

> If one catches malaria, will it re-emerge? Is it true that one cannot have children after catching malaria?

Threads relating to health and safety issues can quickly become gendered. Women posing questions like the one above receive warnings from (self-described) present male migrants not to come to Africa if they have those concerns because it is a very tough environment. This reflects gendered interactions in China, but it may also have something to do with male migrants' own self-identity. Many Chinese migrants to Africa share a narrative about themselves as being especially able to endure hardship—the idea of the capable and tough pioneer. To many participants in migrant forums, working in Africa is synonymous with "enduring hardship" (*chiku shoulei,* 吃苦受累). The (self-asserted) capacity to deal with difficult conditions is just as common. Furthermore, this attitude is not gender specific, as this young woman who grew up in rural China suggests: "I know life is very hard in Africa, but I am willing to endure anything". Chinese "get-up-and-go" has long been mythologized by

Diaspora communities to explain, for instance, relative economic success. There is evidence to support this, but it may also be part of the psychological strategy on the part of prospective migrants to buy into this narrative. Such positive framings also reflect the tone of Chinese media coverage, with its stories routinely emphasizing migrants' selflessness in bringing modernity to underdeveloped locales (redolent of domestic narratives about Tibet and Xinjiang), and rising social status as a result of struggle and sacrifice (Nyiri, 2006: 99).

Present migrants

While many prospective migrants participate in online forums in the guise of information-seekers, Chinese migrants currently living in Africa are knowledge sharers. Many current migrants join prospective migrant discussions to address issues and questions raised there, often relating to security, health care, and perceptions of local people and societies. Often forum members build "floors" (盖楼) of interactions built around a single conversation, forming self-contained virtual communities of reciprocal information sharing and emotional support. Some life stories are narrated over hundreds of such instalments and interactions between the author and readers, which can build up to thousands of "floors". For some users, the forum becomes a venue for both "me-casting" and solidarity with peers. Some migrants use forums to connect with people (strangers) in China to ease their homesickness and seek a sense of belonging. Some present migrants contribute to forums because they were once prospective migrants who benefited from information exchange. In a range of forums for current migrants they share their own life experiences. Our sample includes migrants currently residing in South Africa, Uganda, Namibia, Liberia, Kenya, and Nigeria. Many contributions take the form of sequential threaded "life stories", many starting from the moment they left the airport ("Getting off the plane, I saw black people everywhere and felt uneasy") and providing detailed descriptions of their lives in Africa. Many life experiences are recorded in text and

photographic images, some with no other purpose than self-presentation, others with the intention of showing what life in Africa is "really" like. Numerous threads have the appearance of public diaries detailing living conditions, available food, acquaintances and feelings. Posts can be highly granular, for example describing in excruciating detail the condition of beds, bathrooms or shared eating areas in factory dorms. The importance of the internet is remarked on time and again, and connectivity is a frequent lament, as this worker in Liberia notes:

> The Internet was just connected a few days ago. It is very slow and unstable. Even worse, we cannot go online in our dormitory.

Many contributors are generous with personal, often emotional, observations. For many contributors Africa represents the first time away from China, and an opportunity for personal reflections on life plans, relationships and family. They describe numerous forms of frustration, such as this worker in Nigeria:

> I thought I'd come to do technical jobs, but I am now being used almost all the time as a translator for the manager… So my hands are full now.

Other forms of disillusionment are more personal such as this construction worker in Algeria:

> Back then, I was thinking I could earn more money when I am still young so that I can be financially independent so that my family would not need to worry about me and also I can provide a better life for my girlfriend. However, over the past half year, my parent passed away, and my girlfriend broke up with me due to the long distance. Sometimes, when I think about all these in silent nights, I really feel so bad at the bottom of my heart.

Construction and industrial project work is noted for the long hours, monotony and lack of opportunity for experiencing life outside of compounds. One worker describes how:

> our lives are just confined to the small circle of our project, and thus are very tedious and very dull. Maybe apart from work, you do not have any other ideas really.

Another worker in Algeria writes that:

> As a happy "loser" and bachelor, I am alone everyday here but don't think there is anything wrong with it. I do not even have the time to recall my life here over the past half year.

Due to the small circle they have in Africa and the "simple and boring" life, people use the forums as a vehicle to seek support and connections with Chinese both in Africa and China. Loneliness and homesickness are frequent themes, as exemplified by this worker in Uganda:

> I have been here half a year. What always accompanies me is loneliness and the feeling of missing my wife and my family. Suddenly I realize that I should write to record something here.

It reads like a series of stories about his life moments, which receive applause from the readers and requests for update. Aside from venting or emotional pleas, forums are also a venue where present migrants develop a sense of community and look for people who share similar interests or live in the same area. For example, when one engineer who had been working in Kenya for more than a year complained about his tedious life, and in passing noted a latent interest in photography, other forum users connected him to a local (offline) photography society and (online) social network.

Similar to the rest of the internet, some narratives presented in the forums are confections. As a preventative measure, authors are expected to post photos of the local community where they reside. The absence of photographic or specific textual information on conditions in any location is cause for suspicion among other forum users. However, one notorious post titled "We want to go home; we are now trapped in Madagascar", generated a large number (632) of interactive threads. While many readers expressed their concern over the situation and suggested the channels through which they could seek help from the Chinese embassy, the piece was eventually revealed to be fake. However, even from this fake post, the potential support that the readers can offer for the authors who post their life stories is obvious. The interactivity and support within the community helps create a sense of belonging for those who live in Africa, far away from home. One poster comments on the importance of the Internet in migrants' lives in Africa as follows:

> the Internet has become as important as *air* for all Chinese in Africa. With the Internet, the distance from home is shorter.

Present migrants savour telling readers about a "real Africa", one that is subject to personal distortions, but also different from government portrayals in tightly controlled school curricula and media. Chinese government constructions of "Sino-African friendship" selectively emphasize "south-south" solidarity and other positively framed geopolitical issues. Information about conditions on the ground in African countries is highly circumscribed, particularly if it concerns less positive issues. As one worker with experience in the D. R. Congo, Nigeria, and Zambia put it:

> Before I went abroad I thought black people are all friends of China. But when I really came to Africa I found out that it is not the case at all. Black people described in our domestic education differ enormously from the reality.

This poster went on to discuss his experience of being robbed and car-jacked. Forum users' declaration to share information about "the real Africa" is seldom an exercise in arrogance or self-aggrandisement. As another user put it:

> In China, it is always reported about the China-African friendship rather than the problems. Today, let me talk about the other aspect of Africa.

This "other aspect" of Africa concerned the crime rate, kidnap cases, gun crime, and disease. The content of these posts have to be interpreted with caution, as they often lean on stereotypes, received (sometimes racist) wisdom, and may be distorted by negative emotions such as frustration and loneliness. However, these depictions of what posters believe to be their lived experience of a "real Africa" serve a purpose for the authors, and generate a lot of attention as counterpoints to the Africa constructed by the government controlled education system and media. Exaggerated and partial or not, this information may also help prospective migrants to make better informed decisions. One Chinese worker in Angola, for example, warns his compatriots that "coming to work in Africa means a high salary but high risks": a message that is seldom seen in Chinese media. Another poster writes about the recent death of a Chinese colleague from sickness and warns others to "think twice about coming to Africa". He continues with the following advice:

> I heard about diseases and conflict in Africa, but always had the innocent idea that this is only in a few parts of the continent and most places should be fine. Coming to Africa works better if you picture it in the worst possible way.

Huawei employee experiences

SOEs and privately owned multinationals are active across Africa in resource extraction, power generation, construction, railways, agriculture and telecommunications. Among the latter, Huawei is one of the world's largest companies and is very active across Africa. Headquartered in Shenzhen and officially employee owned, Huawei specializes in building wireless communication infrastructures, providing network services and selling mobile devices. Its wireless bases and LTE networks constitute 50% and 70% of the total in Africa, and optical fibre networks built by Huawei extend to 50,000 kilometres (Science and Technology Daily 2015). Huawei World is a forum on Tianya used primarily by the 180,000 Huawei employees working globally. Since January 2006, it has generated up to 235,000 topic threads and more than 2.17 million comment threads. Our analysis of a sample of Africa threads on this forum indicates that the preoccupations of this type of migrant are somewhat distinct from those of the private individuals. For one thing, Huawei employees are rather more nervous about going to Africa than private entrepreneurs. A job at a major multinational Chinese company like Huawei already marks people out as having succeeded in China's competitive economy. Thus they have more to lose and do not perceive or need Africa to be the place where they make their fortune in exchange for enduring hardship. They already count as "winners" and going to Africa fills many of them with ambivalent feelings, regrets and even dread. Prospective migrants, those who have received postings to Africa, frequently have little or no prior knowledge, as this new employee in the Purchasing Department illustrates:

> I have just been employed by Huawei Purchase Department. I hope brothers can tell me the welfare, salary, work condition, and problems that I may come across in life. I have no idea about these at all. Please tell me some insider details.

Among these new employees, the forums are an essential venue for seeking information and reassurances, as this post shows:

> I will soon go to Africa. It will be the first time that I go abroad. I feel very nervous, having no idea what kind of condition I will be facing. Can you please let me know some situations over there and things to prepare before I go? All I heard is terrible things.

Among posters, a substantial number have little or no international experience, reflected in uninformed fears such as those voiced by a new employee in the Sales Department:

> I heard it is very likely to catch all kinds of diseases such as malaria, and that it is very hard to cure. It is said that one third of the people there are HIV carrier. Is it really so horrible?

Concerns about health and safety issues are particularly pronounced among women, like another Sales employee:

> I am a country girl so enduring hardship is not a problem, but the prospect of getting a disease is frightening. I really cherish this opportunity with Huawei but I'm terrified I'll catch a disease and regret it the rest of my life.

Some employees' decisions to relocate to Africa, taken for professional reasons, are emotionally wrenching, as this post suggests:

> I'm going to Africa right after the National Day holiday. I've just been home to my village to see my folks for three days. Now I'm leaving its hard to take the feeling that I'm going away.

The Huawei forum features fewer posts about lifestyles, working conditions and especially frustrations in Africa, perhaps for reasons of professional discretion. However, there are numerous cases like the one below, of employees seeking a return to China:

> How can I apply for relocation back to China from Africa? I have been in abroad for a while. I want to go back home. What can I do?

Conclusion

While popular western accounts portray Chinese migrants as pawns or foot soldiers in China's "conquest of the planet" (Cardenal and Araújo 2013: 253), Chinese media equate workers' endurance of hardships with the selfless bestowal of modernity, and even "civilization", on

undeveloped African countries (Nyiri, 2006: 86). The findings we discuss in this paper suggest that Chinese migrants to Africa are more mundane than either of these depictions. They want to improve themselves, seek opportunities to earn money or add to their credentials. They are prone to worrying, loneliness, homesickness and boredom. They complain about their bosses and living conditions, while eagerly demonstrating their knowledge. In short, prospective and present Chinese migrants to Africa have ordinary hopes and fears, frustrations and dreams. To cope with the African cultural contexts and the new living environment, they seek for companions and feeling of belonging through online communication with their compatriots. We find less ethnic solidarity or inherent Chinese-ness about interactions on these forums, than something akin to Mohan et al.'s description of "a relational dynamic of immigrants banding together in contexts where they felt unwelcome" (2014: 28). Incoming Chinese to Africa tend not to have connections with formal Chinese institutions like the embassy, with older Chinese communities if they exist, or with host society inhabitants. They lack social capital when they get to Africa, unless they have family ties, which even then represents a circumscribed social circle. For Xiao, who investigated the digital communications of Chinese entrepreneurs in Nigeria, online chatroom interactions are a crucial "means of communication within the transnational Chinese community" (2015: 90). Similarly, we find that for people uprooted, often underprepared and learning on their feet to operate in an environment often without family support networks or established social capital in the form of guanxi, forums are a lifeline. This perhaps explains why, despite leaving the confines of the great firewall, an important part of their existence is spent inside Chinese cyberspace, a feature of other transnational Chinese communities (Sun, 2002). While substantial attention has been paid to China's presence in Africa, Chinese migrants' motivations, experiences, worries and expectations deserve closer examination. **Chinese migrants are not simply state agents: they have individual motivations, expectations and concerns, which are sometimes at odds with the state.**

References

Alden C and Davies M (2006) A profile of the operations of Chinese multinationals in Africa. *South African Journal of International Affairs* 13(1): 83-96.

Alexseev M (2003) Economic valuations and interethnic fears: perceptions of Chinese migration in the Russian Far East. *Journal of Peace Research* 40 (1): 85-102.

Bodomo A (2010) The African trading community in Guangzhou: An emerging bridge for Africa–China relations. *The China Quarterly* 203: 693-707.

Brautigam D (2003) Close encounters: Chinese business networks as industrial catalysts in Sub-Saharan Africa. *African Affairs* 102(408): 447-467.

Brautigam D (2009) *The Dragon's Gift: the Real Story of China in Africa.* Oxford: Oxford University Press

Campbell H (2008) China in Africa: challenging US global hegemony. Third World Quarterly 29(1): 89-105.

Cardenal JP, and Araújo H (2013) *China's Silent army: the Pioneers, Traders, Fixers and Workers Who are Remaking the World in Beijing's Image*. London: Allen Lane

Carmody P (2011) *The New Scramble for Africa*. London: Polity

Castles S and Davidson A (2000) *Citizenship and Migration: Globalization and the Politics of Belonging.* Psychology Press

Dobler G (2009) Chinese shops and the formation of a Chinese expatriate community in Namibia. *The China Quarterly* 199: 707-727.

Driessen M (2015) Migrating for the Bank: Housing and Chinese Labour Migration to Ethiopia. *The China Quarterly* 221: 143-160.

Driessen M (2016) Pushed to Africa: emigration and social change in China. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 42(15): 2491-2507.

Esteban M (2009) The Chinese amigo: implications for the development of Equatorial Guinea. *The China Quarterly* 199: 667-685.

Fish E (2015) *China's Millennials: The Want Generation*. Rowman & Littlefield

French HW (2014) *China's second continent: How a million migrants are building a new empire in Africa*. Vintage

Giese K (2013) Same-Same but Different: Chinese Traders' Perspectives on African Labor. *China Journal* 69: 134-153.

Gu J (2009) China's private enterprises in Africa and the implications for African development. *European Journal of Development Research* 21(4): 570-587.

Haugen HØ and Carling J (2005) On the edge of the Chinese diaspora: The surge of baihuo business in an African city. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28(4): 639-662.

Hirono M and Suzuki S (2014) Why Do We Need 'Myth-Busting'in the Study of Sino–African Relations?. *Journal of Contemporary China* 23(87): 443-461.

Hsu E (2007) Zanzibar and its Chinese communities. *Population, Space and Place* 13(2): 113-124.

Huynh TT, Park YJ and Chen AY (2010) Faces of China: new Chinese migrants in South Africa, 1980s to present. *African and Asian Studies* 9(3): 286-306.

Kipnis A (2006) Suzhi: A keyword approach. *The China Quarterly* 186: 295-313.

Kuang, E (2008) The new Chinese migration flows to Africa. *Social Science Information* 47(4): 643-659.

Lanteigne M (2014) China's Peacekeeping Policies in Mali. *NFG Working Paper No.11*. Free University of Berlin

Large D (2008) Beyond 'dragon in the bush': the study of China–Africa relations. *African Affairs* 107(426): 45-61.

Larmer M and Fraser A (2007) Of cabbages and king cobra: Populist politics and Zambia's 2006 election. *African Affairs* 106 (425): 611-637.

Lee CK (2009) Raw encounters: Chinese managers, African workers and the politics of casualization in Africa's Chinese enclaves. *The China Quarterly* 199: 647-666.

Li A (2012) 中非关系研究中的方法论-兼谈资料利用问题 (On the Methodology and use of data in the Study on China-African Relations). *西亚非洲 (West Asia and Africa)* 3: 4-19.

Mathews G and Yang Y (2012) How Africans pursue low-end globalization in Hong Kong and Mainland China. *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 41(2): 95-120.

Mayer, R (2013) *Serial Fu Manchu: The Chinese Supervillain and the Spread of Yellow Peril Ideology.* Philadelphia PA: Temple University Press

Mawdsley E (2008) Fu Manchu versus Dr Livingstone in the dark continent? Representing China, Africa and the West in British broadsheet newspapers. *Political Geography* 27(5): 509-529.

Michel S and Beuret M (2009) *China Safari: On the Trail of Beijing's Expansion in Africa*. New York: Nation Books

Mohan G (2008) China in Africa: A review essay. *Review of African Political Economy* 35(1): 155-173.

Mohan G, and Lampert B (2013) Negotiating China: Reinserting African Agency into China–Africa Relations. *African Affairs* 112(446): 92-110.

Mohan G and Tan-Mullins M (2009) Chinese Migrants in Africa as New Agents of Development: An Analytical Framework. *European Journal of Development Research* 21(4): 588-605.

Mohan G, Lampert B, Tan-Mullins M, and Chang D (2014) *Chinese Migrants and Africa's Development: New Imperialists or Agents of Change?*. London: Zed Books

Moyo D (2012) *Winner Take All: China's Race for Resources and What It Means for the World*. Basic Books

Nyiri P (2006) The yellow man's burden: Chinese migrants on a civilizing mission. *The China Journal* 56(56): 83-106.

Nyiri P (2011) Chinese entrepreneurs in poor countries: a transnational "middleman minority" and its futures. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 12(1): 145-153.

Oh JH (2016) Immigration and social capital in a Korean-American women's online community: Supporting acculturation, cultural pluralism, and transnationalism. *New Media & Society* 18(10): 2224-2241.

Oiarzabal PJ and Reips U (2012) Migration and diaspora in the age of information and communication technologies. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 38(9): 1333-1338.

Park YJ (2013) Perceptions of Chinese in Southern Africa: Constructions of the "Other" and the Role of Memory. *African Studies Review* 56(1): 131-153.

Pieke FN, Nyíri P, Thunø M, and Ceccagno A (2004). *Transnational Chinese. Fujianese Migrants in Europe.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Postel, H (2017), Moving Beyond "China in Africa": Insights from Zambian Immigration Data. *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 46, 2, 155–174.

Qiu JL (2007) The accidental accomplishment of Little Smart: Understanding the emergence of a working-class ICT. *New Media & Society* 9(6): 903-923.

Sautman B and Yan H (2009) African perspectives on China–Africa links. *The China Quarterly* 199: 728-759.

Science and Technology Daily (2015) 华为促进非洲信息化建设 (Huawei Promotes the ICTs industry in Africa), *China Finance*, 9 December 2015. Available at http://finance.china.com.cn/roll/20151209/3485502.shtml (accessed on 12/11/2016).

Shen S (2009) A constructed (un) reality on China's re-entry into Africa: the Chinese online community perception of Africa (2006–2008). *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 47(3): 425-448.

Shen X (2015) Private Chinese investment in Africa: Myths and realities. *Development Policy Review* 33(1): 83-106.

Shie T (2007) Rising Chinese influence in the South Pacific: Beijing's "island fever", *Asian Survey* 47(2): 307-26.

Sullivan J and Renz B (2010) Chinese migration: Still the major focus of Russian Far East/Chinese Northeast relations? *The Pacific Review* 23(2): 261-85.

Sullivan J and Renz B. (2012) Representing China in the South Pacific. *East Asia: An International Quarterly* 29: 377-390.

Sullivan J (2012) A tale of two microblogs in China. *Media, Culture & Society* 34(6): 773-783.

Sullivan J (2014) China's Weibo: Is faster different? *New Media & Society* 16(1): 24-37.

Sun, W (2002) *Leaving China: Media, Migration, and Transnational Imagination*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers

Sun Y (2014) *Africa in China's Foreign Policy*. Washington, DC:: Brookings

Taylor I (2014) *Africa Rising?: BRICS-Diversifying Dependency*. Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer Ltd

Taylor I and Xiao Y (2009) A Case of Mistaken Identity: "China Inc." and Its "Imperialism" in Sub-Saharan Africa. *Asian Politics & Policy* 1(4): 709-725.

Wallis C (2015) *Technomobility in China: Young Migrant Women and Mobile Phones*. New York and London: NYU Press

Xiang B (2003) Emigration from China: A Sending Country Perspective. *International Migration* 41 (3): 21–48.

Xiang B (2014) The would-be migrant: post-socialist primitive accumulation, potential transnational mobility, and the displacement of the present in northeast China. *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia.* 2 (2): 183 - 199.

Xiao AH (2015) In the shadow of the states: the informalities of Chinese petty entrepreneurship in Nigeria. *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 44(1): 75-105.

Yang J (2009). China in the South Pacific: hegemon on the horizon? *The Pacific Review* 22(2): 139-58.