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French, Howard W. *China's Second Continent: How a Million Migrants are Building a New Empire in Africa.* **New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014, xi+285 pp.**

It is no secret that over the past two decades, China's presence in Africa has grown substantially, prompting many scholars, political analysts and observers alike, to ask about the underlying causal factors behind such a phenomenon. A response to both this inquiry and many other closely related issues can be found in the must-read book by Howard French provocatively titled *China's Second Continent: How a Million Migrants Are Building a New Empire in Africa*.

A veteran journalist, who for several years worked for various major newspapers, including prominently the *New York Times*, French, who on account of his work as a journalist lived for many years both in Africa and China, is in addition to his native English language, fluent in French, Spanish, Portuguese, as well as Chinese (Mandarin). This is all the more important as it makes him uniquely suited to tell the story behind China's recent aggressive push into Africa.

The book is organized into three sections, with a total of ten chapters, each of which purposely focuses on some of the fifteen sub-Saharan African countries that French visited as part of his research. In the book's opening chapter which centers on Mozambique, French traces the recent Chinese migration flow to Africa back to then Chinese President Jiang Zemin, who upon his return home from a groundbreaking visit in Africa in 1996 "explicitly directed the country's firms to "go out," meaning go overseas in search of business" (12). Needless to state, there has been an enthusiastic response to this unprecedented call to go global.

On the whole, Africa appears to have been for China, the place of predilection for the implementation and achievement of the aforesaid go out policy, as French conservatively estimates that in the space of a mere decade, over a million of private Chinese citizens have settled on the continent (13; 26). This assertion is indeed, one of the key revelations of the book. On the matter though, while in its initial phase, the observed massive Chinese migration to Africa occurred as a result of the Chinese state policy, French cautions against viewing it broadly as a state-driven phenomenon. He found no empirical evidence supporting such an approach in the countries he visited. Rather, he stressed that "[t]he historic movement of Chinese to Africa is itself largely driven by word of mouth, by news passed back and forth about a continent that many ordinary Chinese people, even those who reside deep in the hinterland of their country, nowadays speak of in near awe as a place of almost unlimited opportunity" (7).

While the impetus behind the large-scale movement of Chinese in Africa is mainly the desire of ordinary Chinese individuals to go to faraway places to

better themselves economically, there are also other forces at play that motivate their exodus. French makes this point stating that “contributing to the decision for many to take a great leap into the unknown and move to Africa was weariness with omnipresent official corruption back home, fear of the impact of a badly polluted environment on their health, and a variety of constraints on freedoms, including religion and speech” (14). As such, the estimated millions of Chinese immigrants who now call Africa home are not homogeneous but instead, they are made up of a broad spectrum of groups and individuals. It is the stories of these individuals, as told by themselves and from their own unique perspectives, using sometimes their own crude words that French reports verbatim to preserve the authenticity of the narrative, that make up the bulk of the book, its strength and its originality.

China's Second Empire departs from other books on the shared topic of China-Africa engagement or partnership in one crucial way. Instead of writing from an authoritative standpoint with broad statistical data discussed in a pedantic academic language more likely to confuse rather than inform the reader, French adopted a different approach. Using a loose combination of direct observation and unstructured interviews, he was able to convey the experience of those Africans and Chinese who by their actions, the choices they make, the risks they take, in sum by their trials and tribulations, provide the framework by which to understand in its proper context the true nature and complexity of the burgeoning Sino-African relations. Looking at the issue from this perspective that fully integrates the voices of these main actors in the examination of the topic not only provide the missing human dimension to the discussion but it also helps French fill an acute vacuum in the literature.

By verbally engaging as he did with his various interlocutors in different settings as he travels across sub-Saharan Africa, French gathered a wealth of information that is quite revealing. Thus, through his narrative in the book, it becomes apparent that in their overwhelming majority, Chinese migrants in Africa nurture a feeling of superiority over their African counterparts or hosts, whom they incessantly refer to by the generic Chinese term of *hei ren* (the Blacks) (239). Their recurring contention is that they are different from Africans on one fundamental point, that is, “Chinese people can really *chi ku* [eat bitter]” (221). In other words, they can endure hardship or hard labor. As for Africans, according to the Chinese commercial attaché in Mozambique, they just “like to dance” (Ibid). Chen Jun, another Chinese also explained as follows his experience when he first arrived in Nampula, a provincial capital in northern Mozambique: “When I got here I couldn’t believe it. The Black people were so primitive, you know, the way they work. Not like us Chinese. We’re in a hurry” (228). He then added: “The Blacks don’t have any qualifications” (229). One Chinese in northern Namibia even went

as far as bluntly stating that “[n]inety percent of Africans are thieves” (248). Such a statement, in fact, reinforced the conception of the owner of a Chinese medical clinic in Liberia, who proudly stated to French that “he didn’t hire locals, because they were dirty and lazy and prone to stealing” (107).

French describes such examples which abound in the book as his “introduction to a kind of casual primary racism by Chinese newcomers toward Africans” (15). What in fact the above also reveals is that China-Africa relations unfolds against the backdrop of a severe culture clash, as the local African populations for their part, listed a litany of grievances against the Chinese, decrying their business practices and management styles. In particular, they level stark criticism at the Chinese for their constant labor abuses, the low wages they pay, as well as the opacity surrounding the negotiation of contracts. Likewise, they lament the fact that they are being confined to menial jobs, “reduced to the role of task boys” (124). French himself actually better sums up the situation stating the following: “There was mounting resentment over the way China was seen to be exporting its labor, dumping cheap goods, despoiling the environment, dispossessing powerless landholders or flouting local laws, fueling corruption, and most of all, empowering awful governments” (125).

The key objective of the book was to unravel the causal factors behind the recent upsurge of Chinese migration to Africa. With humor and a rich tapestry of interesting anecdotes that capture the essence of the topic, French was able to accomplish this goal. As for the future, whether the current Sino-African partnership will lead to yet another scramble for African resources, only time will tell. In the meantime, African leaders should know that natural resources are depletable assets, whereas the Chinese migrants and their government should also take the necessary steps to avoid that China ends up being perceived by Africans as an unfriendly country. In sum, it is largely incumbent upon all the various actors involved in this partnership to work together to live out the intended meaning of its official mantra and make it truly a *win-win* situation. In the process, the above discussed book can serve as a useful guide for all interested parties.

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