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Book Review: Uncovering the realities of China's power and presence in Africa

ARTICLE SUMMARY

*In his book, **China's Second Continent: How a Million Migrants are building a new Empire in Africa**, author Howard W. French gives readers a unique perspective into the ever-growing activities of the Chinese in Africa.*

China's Second Continent: How a Million Migrants are building a new Empire in Africa

Since the turn of the 21st century, China's increasingly rapid expansion on the African continent via trade, investment and migration has been a very visible phenomenon, but one that is

poorly documented and not well understood. No one knows the true numbers of Chinese settlers across Africa – the most accepted estimate of just over 1 million is thought to be quite conservative. Yet this China-Africa dynamic is set to become one of the most important relationships of the century as two of the world's fastest-growing regions increasingly interlink their interests.

As a former Bureau Chief for both Africa and China for the *New York Times*, author Howard W. French has spent many years in both regions, giving him an exceptional network of contacts and a deep cultural understanding that have allowed him to interview a broad sample of Chinese entrepreneurs across Africa – successful and less so – as well as officials from Chinese state-owned enterprises and African governments. His is a collection of captivating stories from Ghana and Liberia to Mozambique and Namibia (11 countries in all), from tiny towns, remote farms and dam projects to street traders and multi-millionaires, that offer keen insights into the attraction of Africa for China, and Chinese relationships with Africans on the ground.

It may not be surprising to read how, time after time, Chinese migrants boast about having worked hard and endured difficult times in Africa (what they call “eating bitter”) to earn their current success, while deriding the local Africans as lazy, uneducated and impossible to train. What is more interesting is understanding the conditions they have left behind, such as the fierce competition for jobs and space, and the high control exercised by the government. Africa's “freedom” is much valued.

Even more eye-opening (and frustrating) are the tales of the repeated refusal of African governments to act against the Chinese in the face of very poor quality construction, low wages (far below minimum wage when locals are employed at all), illegal fishing and logging, and blatant corruption involving shadowy government contracts and bartering of natural resources. Social tensions and conflict have resulted, echoing the xenophobic attacks in South Africa. Most African governments have been willing to overlook these misdeeds to a large extent, given the substantial benefits they receive from the Chinese like cheap infrastructure development and subsidised loans. African leaders (whether

democratic or not) can claim these as progress, bolstering their own hold on power.

Such examples demonstrate the imbalance of power in favour of China in dealings with individual African governments, who are criticised in several stories for lacking a long-term strategy. China, meanwhile, claims that its rapid expansion is a “win-win” for both sides, purely business-driven, with no other motives. In fact, French argues, Chinese influence can be seen as the latest form of empire building.

Chinese migration has been a cheap way to build new trade networks, assure a favourable reception for China’s interests and extend political influence with governments in a competition for resources. It also helps with overcrowding and joblessness at home. As French points out, its empire-building tendencies can be seen in its “continual preference for funding giant ‘trophy’ projects that serve as constant, highly visible reminders of the country’s power, reach and supposed generosity and solicitude”.

Why should South Africans care? Well, South Africa is home to the continent’s largest Chinese immigrant population. China is also our largest trading partner, and we maintain a substantial trade deficit with them. The vast majority of our exports to China comprise raw materials, while our imports from China are mainly manufactured goods – a worrying imbalance. Just as other African states, South Africa needs to manage its relationship with China carefully to ensure its long-term impact is not detrimental. The growing Africa-China partnership will surely be one of the most influential of the century to come.

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