BRIDGING THE GAP: EXPERIENCES AND ATTITUDES IN SINO-AFRICAN RELATIONS

By Carol Wang and Danielle Flam

China’s diplomatic relations with Sudan and other African nations have attracted increasing international attention. At the same time, there is a growing but still inadequate awareness of the complex relations between very different cultures at the personal level.

Across Africa today, there are myriad signs of China’s assiduous courtship of African states: Chinese-built dams, power lines, roads, stadiums, schools, hospitals, railways and increasing trade. The expanding relations between the PRC government and a number of African nations have also ushered in an unprecedented degree of contact between Chinese and Africans, through increased migration, business interactions, academic and official exchange programs, and even online discussions. Individual interactions are also increasing, a fact that highlights the importance of cultural understanding between Chinese migrants, workers, businesspeople, and tourists, and their African hosts. Similarly, Chinese at home have more opportunities now to interact with African students, officials, and businesspeople, as a result of the friendly overtures of the Chinese government towards African countries and economic interests.

To date, however, aside from anecdotal reporting, Chinese and African personal views and attitudes towards each other have not been surveyed systematically. The methodological challenges of attitudinal and opinion research are complex and daunting, and in the context of China-Africa, include:

- Media content analysis: News reports, academic studies and online blogs covering African views of Chinese are not as widely available as Chinese views of Africans. Differences in coverage of the African and Chinese perspectives pose difficulties for studies conducted without personal interviews.

- “Africa” and “China” tend to be referenced as two monolithic entities in much of the existing media, despite the fact that the African continent includes a diversity
of states, each engaged in their own bilateral relationships with China; for example, South Africa-China relations have different history and dimensions from Sudan-China relations.

- Conceptual differences between race and nationality are often conflated in popular understanding, as expressed in news, film, television, blogs and other forms of media. This is evident not only in Chinese views of blacks (e.g., Malian, Zambian, Senegalese and black Americans are viewed the same way), but within the context of the Chinese nation (“Chinese” is used to refer overwhelmingly to Han Chinese).

Much of the existing literature on Sino-African relations has focused on strategic, economic, diplomatic and political issues, with limited or tangential discussion of current perceptions and personal views of individuals affected by the burgeoning levels of official cooperation and exchanges. News reports and other literature have only skimmed issues such as the individual costs born by local Africans, the impact of Chinese competition on African businesses, and the loss of benefits for workers as African state-operated enterprises (SOEs) are replaced by Chinese companies. Most available information consists of accounts from visitors, popular media reports or online discussions. These glimpses do not give us an accurate picture of social interactions or attitudes, but only a narrow sampling of the perceptions that exist among Africans about Chinese, and among Chinese about Africans.

Tensions arising in the current Sino-African context take a variety of forms, from resentment over job competition to curiosity regarding physical and cultural differences. While the interaction between the two cultures appears to be thriving, it is worth taking a closer look at the history, and examining how race plays into political and economic relationships between China and countries in Africa.

This article attempts to examine the effect of existing attitudes on Chinese relations with African nations through accounts of the experiences of Africans in China for academic, business and diplomatic reasons, and those of Chinese in Africa for business and government initiatives.

Because the views presented here are not comprehensive or representative, this article does not seek to draw conclusions about African-Chinese inter-personal relations, but rather to suggest the need for a more comprehensive and rigorous examination of existing prejudices and discriminatory practices, and their impact and role on growing Sino-African interactions.

Chinese in Africa

Hindered by vast distance as well as lack of technology, Chinese excursions to Africa were relatively limited until recent decades. Aside from the expedition by the famous Chinese Admiral Zheng He in 1405, there was direct and indirect trade dating back to the Tang Dynasty (618–896 A.D.), and relatively small groups of Chinese laborers, pris-
oners and immigrants who went to Africa subsequently. During the late Mao era, in the 1960s and 1970s, a more solid relationship between Africa and China developed through aid projects, most notably the Tan-Zam railroad extending from Tanzania to Zambia. Chinese engineers worked to construct stadiums, lay down roads and build hospitals as part of the battle to “win the hearts and minds of Third World citizens” following the Sino-Soviet split. During the 1980s, Chinese interest in large-scale projects in Africa waned, as China occupied itself with its own changing economic policies. It was not until recently that China rekindled its interest in Africa, once again bringing aid, but also looking for resources.

China's rapidly growing influence on the African continent today can be attributed to business interests in the form of trade, investment and aid:

- **Trade:** China is now Africa's third largest trading partner, following the United States and France. Chinese trade with Africa increased from $11 billion in 2000 to a record $55.5 billion in 2006. African exports to China have increased from nine percent in 1990 to 27 percent in 2005. Most of the increase can be attributed to oil imports from Sudan beginning in 1995, and massive energy investments in Angola between 2003 and 2004. Roughly 800 Chinese-owned companies now operate in Africa.

- **Investment:** Chinese investment in Africa is also increasing. In the first 10 months of 2005, Chinese companies invested $175 million in African countries. The stock of Chinese Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Africa in 2005 totaled $1.6 billion. (However, it is important to note that this is only 3 percent of China's total FDI; Chinese investment is focused primarily on Asia and Latin America.)

- **Aid:** Chinese aid to African nations is also growing. Estimated at a proffered $8.1 billion in 2007, Chinese aid is expected to surpass the World Bank's assistance of $2.3 billion. Aid from China takes the form of credits from the Chinese Export-Import Bank as well as humanitarian aid programs.

**Quick numbers: How many Chinese are in Africa today?**

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<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Businesses</td>
<td>800 Chinese-owned companies operating in Africa in 2006, up from 650 in 2005</td>
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<td>Migrants</td>
<td>30,000–80,000 Chinese migrants in Zambia in 2006, 300,000 in South Africa in 2006</td>
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<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>About 2,000 Chinese students in Africa (1.8% of all Chinese students studying abroad) in 2003</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tourists</td>
<td>110,000 to Africa in 2005, up from 55,000 in 2004, 40,000 to South Africa in 2005</td>
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Despite efforts to translate increasing trade, investment and aid into goodwill toward China, available information indicates that African views of Chinese interests vary widely, from an enthusiastic welcoming of non-Western aid and investment options to apprehensions regarding the motives behind Chinese interests.

The following section reviews accounts of African-Chinese encounters in a few select African countries. Although no single country’s experience can be considered representative of the entire African continent, this sampling gives some insight into the differing perspectives between cultures, as well as between political elites, workers and businesspeople.

THE EXPERIENCE OF SUDAN

China’s interest in Africa is mainly as a source of raw material, especially oil. China became a net importer of oil in 1993, accounting for 40 percent of total growth in global demand for oil between 2003 and 2007, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration. By 2045, China is expected to depend on imported oil for 45 percent of its energy needs, with Africa as a major source.¹⁹ At present, China is seeking oil supplies from six African countries: Nigeria, Angola, Sudan, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and the Republic of Congo, and accounts for 64 percent of Sudan’s oil exports.²⁰
Chinese businesses operate in 49 African countries at present. Most news coverage depicts Africans as welcoming of Chinese investment, excited about the possibility of new jobs, trade and alternatives to Western aid. However, African workers and small business owners seem to share a common fear that local industry and the needs of local people will be neglected as China devotes its energies to extracting resources.

Many African leaders have commented favorably on China’s lack of “colonial baggage,” with China perceived as a fellow developing country seeking to build a “south-south” relationship, not as a world power intent on exploitation. Chinese aid and investment does not place conditions on how to spend the money. As Awad al-Jaz, Sudan’s energy minister, pointed out in an interview with Granta, “With the Chinese we don’t feel any interference in our Sudanese traditions or politics or beliefs or behaviours ... business is business. There is no other business but the business.” China’s “no-strings-attached” approach promises not only wealth, but also a chance to challenge western pressure.

It is precisely this no-strings-attached attitude, however, that has drawn widespread criticism from both Western and African observers. China’s role in Darfur and the Sudan’s human rights situation in general have recently drawn increasing criticism from the international community, including human rights groups such as Amnesty International. Actress and UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador Mia Farrow recently made a public appeal for China to use its power to stop violence in Darfur, at the same time as reports surfaced that China was violating a United Nations arms embargo by selling weapons to Sudan.

The negative impact of Chinese investment on the lives of Sudanese is not limited to China’s complicity in the continued conflict in Darfur. The lives of Sudanese are impacted by Chinese business in many ways, as exemplified by Sudanese refugees forced off their land to make way for Chinese oil fields. Business is not just business; how and why business is conducted affects people’s lives and livelihoods. The roads the Chinese built as a part of the Sudanese oil deal allowed electricity to be supplied to nearby homes; but thousands of displaced refugees now living in poverty in Khartoum are forming their own, less positive, opinions of the Chinese: “Investment is good. It will develop our land, but the most important thing is how we are treated. In the end, the Chinese must go home. This is not their country. Then this will all be ours.”

As China extracts oil from Sudan and Angola, timber from Gabon, platinum from Zimbabwe and copper from Zambia, ordinary Africans are beginning to voice doubts about the balance of gain and loss.

**THE EXPERIENCE OF ZAMBIA**

African resentment against Chinese migrants and businesses mainly arises from issues of land and job competition. Chinese investment in projects throughout Africa, from basic infrastructure to tourist hotels, gives rise to construction jobs, but Chinese businesses tend to bring their own work crews rather than providing jobs and transferring skills to locals. In cases where African labor is hired, laborers often meet with difficulty.
One well-known example is the experience of workers in a copper mine in Zambia’s Chambishi Township. The mine has a deplorable safety record, workers’ benefits are constantly cut, and employees are paid only $100 a month.29 One miner, who refused to give his name for fear of losing his job, told a journalist, “We are glad that the Chinese reopened the mine, as unemployment here was very high . . . but they are difficult to work for. Safety is still poor even after the explosion that killed my friends, and when we ask for more money, they threaten to sack us. I would prefer to work for white managers—they are better educated and they understand what a Zambian needs to live on.”30

Decreasing benefits may well be the unavoidable byproduct of privatization of a previously state-owned mine. But the resentful attribution of this loss to the new Chinese owners may reflect wider anxieties circulating among local laborers. Another miner was quoted as observing, “They have created employment but they should improve the social conditions . . . . If they are taking our copper they should give something back to the community.”31 Tensions over the Chinese presence were recently highlighted in a spate of kidnappings of Chinese workers and attacks on Chinese-owned facilities.32

This complex relationship seems to define a general African sentiment toward the Chinese. While on the whole Africans appear to welcome Chinese investment and the

“They have created employment but they should improve the social conditions . . . . If they are taking our copper they should give something back to the community.”

Zambian mine worker
accompanying jobs, trade and alternatives to Western forms of aid, they also want to be sure that benefits stay in Africa.

The fear and resentment that has developed among some Africans in relation to Chinese business practices became palpable in Zambia’s October 2006 elections, when Zambia’s main opposition leader, Michael Sata, nearly unseated Levy Mwanawasa as Zambia’s president by campaigning on an anti-Chinese platform. Sata depicted the recent arrival of more than 80,000 Chinese as a threat to the interests of the African people.

As local businesses and jobs are taken over by Chinese, and land that was taken from white farmers during the independence struggle is given to Chinese to cultivate, many like Sata fear a repeat of the colonial experience, and are resentful of the Chinese who introduce such a possibility. In a recent speech, Sata stated, “The land will be repossessed without compensation because the whole independence struggle was about land... We can’t be invaded by more than 80,000 human beings and stand with our hands akimbo.”

Even allowing for the exaggerated posturing of political candidates, the evident resonance of Sata’s campaign suggests there are plenty of Africans who equate the Chinese extraction of resources, land appropriation and importation of labor with previous colonial incursions, despite claims by China’s vice minister of Commerce, Wei Jianguo, that Africa and China are “complementary partners,” and that this “new type of strategic partnership between China and Africa is characterized by equality, mutual benefit and economic win-win cooperation.”

As Chinese traders flood Africa with cheap products such as electronics, plastic goods and clothes, they bring competition to the African marketplace, and concerns of damage to the local economy. In an interview with The Economist, a local trader of Indian origin complained, “Two years ago I did not have time to sit down; now I’m sitting doing nothing.” He blames this on competition from Chinese traders. The Congress of South African Trade Union’s head of fiscal, monetary and public sector policy unit, Neva Makgetla, has expressed worries that competition in goods manufacturing will limit African employment to mining, farming and tourism, which he believes will never create enough jobs or a basis for sustainable development.

It is this concern that Zambia’s African workers will ultimately be driven out of local business that seems to raise the most serious questions over the ways in which Africans stand to benefit from the Chinese presence. According to Guy Scott, the Patriotic Front leader in the Zambian parliament, “It’s hard to know how they all got here... There’s a lot of Chinese here doing construction. Zambians can do that. The Chinese building firms are undercutting the local firms... Our textile factories can’t compete with cheap Chinese imports subsidized by a foreign government. People are saying: ‘We’ve had bad people before. The whites were bad, the Indians were worse but the Chinese are worst of all.’”

South Africa, for one, has addressed this issue through trade unions, which have suc-
ceed in protecting South African textile production by negotiating quotas on Chinese clothing imports.\textsuperscript{39} Actions like this in other African nations could help reduce resentment and anxiety among local workers and merchants, and ensure that relations with China might actually live up to Hu Jintao’s vision of “equality, mutual benefit and economic win-win cooperation.”\textsuperscript{40}

**THE ENTREPRENEURIAL VIEW**

In contrast to the apparent mixed feelings among workers, it appears that many African leaders and entrepreneurs hold more positive views of the Chinese. In contrast to Zambia’s opposition party, the president, Levy Mwanawasa, insists that Chinese investment offers new opportunities for economic development and change.

Moreover, members of the upper class in several African countries argue that the Chinese treat them as equals, and invest in infrastructure, a sector that is avoided by Western aid and investment.\textsuperscript{41} One opinion piece in the East African Standard argues that African political leaders believe that China’s Confucian emphasis on collective interests over individual liberties is beneficial to economic development.\textsuperscript{42} Africans see Chinese managers and translators living in barracks-style accommodations, without the comfort and expense demanded by Western expatriates, and attribute this to devotion to African development. As Sierra Leone’s Information Minister told Granta, “The Chinese don’t seem to rest . . . We could learn from that.”\textsuperscript{43}

The question of capital- and skills-transfer to the general populace in African countries remains unresolved. As long as Chinese nationals are imported for labor, technology is limited to Chinese projects, trade remains one-sided and few new jobs are created, Africans will inevitably complain of a lack of lasting benefits.

**Africans in China**

The exponential increase in the number of Chinese heading towards Africa each year is not matched by Africans going to China. In addition, information on African businesspeople or immigrants in China is largely limited to the experiences of African students at Chinese universities.

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**Quick numbers: How many Africans are in China today?**

| **Students** | Scholarships for 1500\textsuperscript{47}/2,000\textsuperscript{48} African students are awarded by China each year  
In 2003, 1,793 students from Africa accounted for 2.31 percent of all international students in China\textsuperscript{49} |
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<td><strong>Officials</strong></td>
<td>14,000 Africans trained by China since 2004\textsuperscript{50}</td>
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In the 1960s, African students in China numbered in the hundreds as a result of Mao Zedong’s overtures to friendly states in Africa. His attempt to bill the PRC as a leader of the Third World led him to offer support for anti-colonial movements against Western powers, and concrete cooperation in the form of infrastructure projects and academic exchanges. In 1961 and 1962, Mao’s scholarship program brought 118 African students to China to study technology and the sciences. In 2003, China hosted 1,793 students from African countries, accounting for 2.31 percent of all international students in China.

AFRICAN DISCONTENT AND CHINESE ATTITUDES

During the 1950s and 1960s, African students studying in China generally came from elite backgrounds, and a survey about their experiences cited low living standards, language difficulties and a lack of social opportunities as causes for discontent with life in China. Many African students left China in 1962 after the beating of a Zanzibari by Beijing hotel staff in a dispute over the sale of cigarettes. This incident, which had reportedly racist overtones, exacerbated the situation of dissatisfaction that many African students felt. In the early 1970s, Africans began returning to China; but living standards remained a source of dissatisfaction, and a dozen students at the Beijing Railroad Engineering School burned portraits of Mao intentionally so that they would be deported.

In the 1980s, a series of racist brawls and incidents culminated in a rash of anti-African riots throughout major cities in 1988 and 1989. Comments by both African and Chinese students during that period indicate that racial tensions had become a major problem, particularly in the eyes of many of the 1,500 African students in China at the time. When asked by a reporter why Africans were leaving China in March 1989, Ibnou Ndiaye, a Senegalese national studying engineering in Shanghai, told a reporter, “We are leaving because of racism against blacks. It’s the simple reason why I cannot continue.”

There were protests from a few African government officials and the Organization of African Unity, but these were reportedly watered down in the interests of preserving diplomatic relationships. Chinese officials were slow to respond to requests by African officials for meetings on the matter, and denied that racism was an issue. In March 1989, then Foreign Minister Qian Qichen declared that “racial discrimination simply does not exist in China,” attributing the riots instead to headstrong youth: “Young people tend to get excited and problems like this occur among young people ... it is not realistic to call it racial discrimination,” he added.

ATTITUDES ABOUT RACE AND OFFICIAL RESPONSES IN RECENT YEARS

While high-tension incidents such as those in the 60s, 70s and 80s have not been reported more recently, blacks say they continue to be singled out in China as a result of their appearance. Buddy Buruku, the Chinese-speaking daughter of a retired Ugandan diplomat, told The South China Morning Post that she is subjected to non-stop
comments about her appearance when she walks the streets of Beijing.57 While some are harmless, others indicate misguided stereotypes, and some are outright offensive.

As the Chinese government lays out the welcome mat, Africans in China continue to receive mixed messages from ordinary Chinese, as reactions to their presence range from expressions of curiosity to overtly derogatory remarks. In 2005, racist comments flooded the online forums of sina.com, a popular Chinese Web site, after a visit to China by U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Liu Xiaobo, a veteran writer and democracy activist, wrote on the New Century Net Web site that of the 800 messages he read on about Rice’s visit, 70 were racist comments about the color of her skin.58 These comments echoed sentiments expressed in other online discussions, such as one on a China Daily BBS strain labeled, “Why do Chinese in China hate black people?”

Blatantly derogatory comments on these forums were accompanied by positive, if less than progressive, portrayals of blacks: “[C]hinese people is full of enthusiasm to foreigner, that’s extraordinarily right! [I]n my memory, the black are always funny, they are talkative and adept in humor! [A]t least, most of my friends think so!”59 While these comments cannot be considered representative of Chinese attitudes towards blacks, they reflect stereotyped perceptions. Views expressed on Internet forums and chat-rooms also need to viewed in light of the existing digital divide in which online users tend to be demographically elite, male and urban residents.

While Chinese government officials have hailed a new era of Sino-African relationships, there was no official response to these forums, and the derogatory comments have gone uncensored; for an authoritarian state that is quick to crack down on discussions of taboo topics, racism does not appear to be one of concern. As with derogatory comments against the Japanese,60 these expressions are problematic for a government that claims to want equal footing and respect in its bilateral relationships.

What does this mean for Sino-African relations today?

However positive and mutually beneficial the current relationships between African states and the Chinese government, individual perceptions and attitudes will impact the way Africans and Chinese cooperate in the professional realm. Although there is little empirical data on Chinese attitudes towards blacks today,61 or African perceptions about the Chinese, anecdotal evidence suggests that there is a lot more to be done in terms of bridging cultural gaps, and teaching understanding of the “other.”

Recently, African and Chinese civil society organizations (CSOs) came together to discuss China’s growing presence in Africa.62 Sara Musa El Saeed, a consultant with Christian Aid in Sudan, expressed the sentiment that the “general public on the two sides are not aware of what is going on, how this might affect them, [and] how to address the relations . . . ,” and went on to suggest a significant role that CSOs can fill in this void. She emphasized the need to “build trust, contacts/connections and exchange of information.”63
More meetings such as this may help to ensure that as interactions increase between Chinese and Africans on the soil of African countries, the focus will grow on whether the Chinese are good guests in a foreign land, and whether the business they bring—and the way they go about it—extends benefit beyond their own interests to include those of local Africans.

Notes

7. Mauro De Lorenzo, op. cit.
10. De Lorenzo.
11. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. In January, militants in Nigeria abducted nine Chinese oil workers and five telecommunications workers, who were all later released unharmed. In another incident, gunmen kidnapped two Chinese workers in the southern Nigerian state of Anambra in March; they also were later released unharmed. Additionally, a Chinese engineer was killed in an attack on a Chinese stone materials plant in Kenya earlier this year. And on April 24, guerrillas attacked a Sinopec oil facility in eastern Ethiopia, killing 68 Ethiopian workers and nine Chinese, and kidnapped seven Chinese technicians, who were later released.
46. Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, “International Students in China,”
47. Rui Yang, “China’s Soft Power Projection in Higher Education,” International Higher Edu-
cation, No. 46 (WINTER 2007), http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/soe/cihe/newsletter/Number46/
49. Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, “International Students in China,”
people.com.cn/200506/18/eng20050618_190938.html.
1994), p. 414. Also see Emmanuel Hevi, An African Student in China (London: Pall Mall,
53. Alan Hutchinson, China’s African (Boulder: Westview, 1975), pp. 186–89; Alaba Ogunsanwo,
138 (June 1994), p. 413.
54. Guy Dinmore, “African students say they quit China because of racism,” Reuters, March 15,
1989.
Guy Dinmore, “African students say they quit China because of racism,” Reuters, March 15,
1989.
Kristof, “China Assails Foreign Reports on Racial Strife,” The New York Times, January 8,
1989.
57. Didi Kirsten Tatlow, “True colours; Reaction to US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice’s Bei-
ing visit suggests judgments based on race and sex are an entrenched part of mainland life,”
South China Morning Post, April 1, 2005.
58. Sylvia Yu Chao: Global View: China: Foreign ghosts,” Canadian Broadcasting Corporation,
June 30, 2005.
60. In the online comments about Rice, there was reference to Rice’s support for Japan’s bid for a
permanent seat on the UN Security Council. This fanned the existing anti-Japanese senti-
ment expressed in the forums. See for example, Didi Kirsten Tatlow, “True colors,” South
China Morning Post, April 1, 2005.
61. In 1992, a poll researching racial hierarchy and social elitism in China was conducted. The
population surveyed included 461 persons in 14 diverse sampling populations, primarily stu-
dents and intellectuals, but also high school students, PLA recruits, research institute staff,
factory management personnel, and municipal employees. See Barry Sautman, “Anti-Black
62. The meeting was convened by China Development Brief, Fahamu, Focus on the Global South
and the Transnational Institute.