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Chinese Engagement in Africa: Rhetoric and Reality[1]

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This article addresses the impact of increased Chinese engagement in Africa, the questions raised by citizens and politicians and the rhetoric that China is allegedly applying in winning the confidence of African leadership in the continent. It begins with reference to casual conversations and subsequent interviews with citizens of the city of Durban, who believe that they are direct casualties of the cheap Chinese textiles, clothing and shoes that have flooded South African markets. The widespread impact of these products has led to prolonged unemployment, underemployment and closure of manufacturing industries and retail businesses that have eroded the confidence of many South Africans' ever acquiring long term or permanent employment in any one of these sectors again. African leaderships tend to accept Chinese Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Africa on terms set by the Chinese, while the general population in each country continue to extend both caution and aversion towards their presence. What this demonstrates is that China's foreign policy commitment of 'non-interference in African countries internal affairs' is more rhetorical than helpful. The article concludes that in conjunction with working supportively with repressive governments, the very nature of flooding markets with cheap Chinese products constitutes acts of interference in African countries' internal industrial and commercial activities.
Keywords: China in Africa, China in South Africa, qualitative study, impact of Chinese investment.

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to reveal the disconnection between Chinese commitment to the economic improvement of developing countries and the real impact of their investments. China's rapid growth and integration into the global economy is supported by at least two major factors. The first is its subtle shift away from a rigidly communist state towards a more open market that has boosted its productivity levels. This ideological shift has boosted its economic growth rates to levels unmatched by most other major world economies. Since 1995, China's GDP grew by an average of 9% per annum. Such enormous level of performance has encouraged the Chinese government to look externally for more trade and investment opportunities. However, lack of awareness still prevails about the impact this is having on internal business performances as well as on the lives of real people. Under the pretext of economic development, China's entry into economies all over the world is beginning to reveal ruptures in the levels of trust at both government and local population levels. The work of Jenkins et al. (2008) on the impact of Chinese investment in Latin America and the Caribbean alludes to this through statistical figures on export-import flows and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). While such an approach is useful to understanding the issues at macro levels, we are yet to learn through the lenses of an anthropological empirical perspective about the impact on community, family and individual levels. Evidence in this article aims at these factors through qualitative studies of individuals, families and their businesses. The African continent, including specific reference to South Africa, remains just as much a victim of Chinese investments as countries in other continents.

As an anthropological response to Chinese investment in the mid-city of Durban, South Africa, this article draws inspiration from the re-invigoration of urban studies by editors Pardo and Prato's (2018) *Palgrave Handbook of Urban Ethnography*. Through recollection of the history of urban studies in anthropology, they provide a convincing argument to incorporate western urban

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settings into the diverse interests in the subject. Central to this factor is their recommendation that people's voices from the ground must be integral to the qualitative approach that is characteristic of anthropological research. A relevant point about 'the field' in empirical studies by Cynthia Gonzalez (2018) appears amidst the 30 contributions to this *Handbook*. Gonzalez (2018: 387) views the field as a knowledge-filled space that belongs to the people that occupy it. Through discussion of ethnographies that challenge current dominant discursive formations of marginalised formations, Gonzalez avers towards advocacy on their behalf. Participant observation, as she rightly notes, provides an equally rich database that conventional fieldwork in rural areas once provided to anthropologists. Similarly, the exploitative situation in which marginalised urbanites find themselves requires support through some form of advocacy. While this recommendation is complimentary in the field of applied anthropology, it ignores an emerging concern in the urban milieus of developing countries where the perpetrators are well known but unseen and protected by the state for whatever benefits elitist segments of society may gain in the process. For instance, neo-colonial patterns of investments by ex-colonist (European) countries use elected governments to reproduce their control over natural resources and labour requirements without the presence of their citizens. In the African continent, a similar situation is consolidating through investments from China, as the information that follows will illustrate. The importance of this factor ought to be viewed, as Pardo and Prato (2018: 4) argue, not as being of momentary political capturing, but of longer term intellectual relevance. In Africa and in other continents western countries that dominated decision making in abstention, even after the end of colonisation, no longer enjoy the privilege of gerrymandering from a distance. China is rapidly replacing post-colonial European supremacy to become, in the next few decades, the new hegemonic threat to social, economic and political stability in developing countries. Classic examples already exist in South Africa, Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Afghanistan among a range of other countries. As more information from the field emerges, resonant with Cynthia Gonzalez's call, appropriate paradigmatic and theoretical models must emerge. Their relevance, in Pardo and Prato's (2018: 5) narrative, must reflect the significant dynamics of the cultural, political, environmental and economic differences in order to avoid the abstract theorisation that the 'anthropology *of* the city' has so often produced.

A Rude Awakening

On 1 September 2021, the South African public awoke to a challenging claim about a major concern of national security emanating from a member of the country's Parliament. At least three claims were made: of alleged links to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in China, acting as a spy for the CCP and not being a bona fide South African citizen, all of which appeared in media reports. Reference was to Xiaomei Harvard, an African National Congress (ANC [ruling party]) member of parliament who allegedly played a role in the leaking of an intelligence report to the Chinese. Attacks from opposition parties, albeit expected, abounded (*SABC News* 2021). Accusations against the ANC were of employing a foreigner who allegedly worked by 'double standards', did not work with the best interests of the country in mind and was allowed to be privy to the country's classified documents. 'Washing of dirty linen in public' began with vitriolic attacks against the ANC by opposition party members. Accusations of the ANC 'looting the country' and selling off parliamentary information and assets to foreign interests, such as from India and China, resonated between public officials and members of the public. This brought to mind information that was collated in a research project over several years and which portrayed the impact of China's rising influence in South Africa.

Since the mid-1970s, a mid-town industrial cum commercial hub in the city of Durban, popularly known as Brickfield Road (renamed 'Felix Dlamini Road' as an act of denunciation with the apartheid past), served as a major centre of economic activity for textile manufacturers, clothing retailers and employees in both sectors. The numerous entrepreneurs and hundreds of employees had a positive impact on surrounding retail supermarkets, clothing and shoe shops, food take-outs, butcheries, upholsterers and curtain manufacturers, among a range of other enumerated and unenumerated enterprises. While mornings and afternoons were abuzz with employees streaming to work, Friday afternoons and Saturdays were witness to the reticulation of capital within this business area that was almost exclusively South African generated. Entrepreneurs and employees bonded with local businesses and supported them for almost all their domestic requirements. Manufacturer and retail links extended to a range of other centres of commercial activity, as well as directly to consumers within and outside the province as well. Quality in production or in sourcing quality goods and provision of personalised services served as a basis for bonding and trust among the agents of exchange. A crucial factor in these services, especially in times of doubt and unhappiness, was the ability to communicate directly with entrepreneurs to settle transactions only when mutual satisfaction was accepted by both parties. Service provider and client relationships revolved around the oriental art of bargaining, demand for personalised service and quality goods at commendable prices. These kinds of transactions often served as publicity for entrepreneurs and a sense of pride for clients in sourcing quality goods and services at the best possible prices. In turn, they created a basis for social networks and advertisements for service providers through word of mouth. Until the end of the twentieth century, most Indian-owned businesses avoided the costly options of advertising in the print media. It was through residents in the immediate vicinities of businesses and personalised networks that news about service providers spread.

For the next 25 years until the year 2000, the economic hub that Brickfield Road was percolated to surrounding enterprises in ways that positively infused confidence among local investors, neighbourhood residents and employees from the wider surrounding suburbs. A post-colonial subaltern culture had consolidated amidst the confidence of successful enterprises and employees who felt secure in what amounted to long term or permanent employment. Regular incomes and widespread employment of the working class in semi-skilled, as well as blue- and white-collar jobs, created a stability among workers and their households that provided positive direction for their children's education and career development. The cuisine, social lifestyles, localised colloquiums and patterns of inter-racial and official interactions were peculiar to the Durban socio-political milieus. Milieus are pluralistic by virtue of class and racialized characteristics of the apartheid and early post-apartheid eras. Recognition of these factors are intended to serve as a reminder of the boundedness of both classes and racial segments of Durban's heterogeneous makeup. Failure to recognise this diversity could amount to a romanticised depiction of a generally segmented and fractious society as well.

By the early 2000s, the shrinking share of the manufacturing enterprises and the loss of jobs began impacting upon the retail sector in the wider surroundings of Brickfield Road. Amidst the growing unhappiness and rising protests against cheap Chinese imports there was concomitant downscaling and closure of numerous enterprises within Brickfield Road and its surrounding areas. The sudden erosion of thriving businesses and the rapid loss of hundreds of jobs produced personal accounts of equally rapid loss of confidence in self-worth and household futures. This kind of situation is not unique to South Africa. *The Economist* (20 April 2011) brought to our attention similar situations in neighbouring provinces and Southern African countries. It covered the darkened alleys of the Soweto market in Gauteng Province, South Africa and in Lusaka, Zambia, where the arrival of Chinese traders brought about an immediate steep drop in prices in at least two staple food items. Chicken prices were literally halved and the price of cabbages dropped by 65%. Frustrated livestock dealers marched with their wire mesh cages to the Competition Commission in Lusaka to protest the Chinese presence in their territory. One of the sellers was quoted as declaring: 'How dare the Chinese disturb our market?' In the same article of *The Economist*, it was reported that in Dar-es-Salaam, the commercial capital of Tanzania, Chinese entrepreneurs were stopped from selling in their markets. Prior to April 2011, the government had declared that Chinese were welcome as investors but not as 'vendors or shoe-shiners'.

Three Case Studies

What began as casual conversations in the wider Brickfield Road precincts had a further twofold transformation which, in retrospect, turned into anecdotal evidence that served as the basis for further research for a paper in the latter half of 2015. An arbitrary number of ten people were chosen for interviews, all of whom were affected by the closure of businesses in the target area. They included three entrepreneurs, two white-collar workers, three blue-collar workers and two pink-collar workers. In each interaction, both the South African state and Chinese imports were referred to in grudging vulgarities that echoed with unforgiving attitudes. The three cases studies presented below are based on the impact of the business closures on the informants' personal lives. They provide a glimpse into the broader impact of cheap Chinese imports into South Africa.

The progress one of the entrepreneurs, who employed 35 people in his shirt making factory, was slow but promising. Having started off in his garage in February 1993 with just his wife and two school going children who helped after school hours and during weekends, the incremental build-up of orders enticed him to buy more equipment and employ two more people after ten months of business. By the second year of business, a singular but huge order forced him to acquire more equipment and hire four more people, so that he could meet the required deadline. His payments for the order were made in time because his deliveries met the requisite expectations. December 1994 was a bumper Christmas for his family and himself. His reputation of meeting order dates and good quality work attracted more orders for 1995. This increase in orders required a bigger space to accommodate more employees to meet his deadlines. By February 1995, he rented a space in Brickfield Road and had in his weekly payroll 17 employees, which increased to 35 by October 1997. However, it was only in December 1997 that he was able to bank a sum of money that made him feel secure. His daughter's wedding in July 1998 allowed him to have a grand occasion on a scale that he expected he would '…ever be able to afford'. In his words, his family were by then '… able to enjoy the big "Cs" – comforts, conveniences and confidence – in the future'. He was satisfied that upon his death the factory would support his wife and two children and allow them the privilege of forgoing the need to search for employment or work for someone else. Until the end of 2000, his factory's performance remained outstanding, despite two clients having reneged on their orders by the end of November that year. By 2001, fewer orders came in and more clients cancelled their orders. In talking to other entrepreneurs there appeared to be a pattern emerging, eventually bringing them to realise that cheaper Chinese products were instigating rapid changes in the textile manufacturing sector. He complained:

> 'We were so caught up in our work that we had no time to even ask questions. We just thought that we were going through a rough patch that would set itself right again because we are hard workers. Little did we realise that it was the Chinese that were encroaching into our fxxking businesses!'

Despite public protests, representations to the state and attempts to take up the issue with the Constitutional Court, the momentum of change had set in. After gradually having to retrench his employees, he had nothing left to pay the last few months' rent. He had to keep the remaining eight employees but could not pay them because two of his last three clients cancelled in favour of purchasing cheaper Chinese goods. By the end of 2002, he had to liquidate his business. The stress of the losses impacted upon his daughter's marriage to the point of her having to divorce her husband by 2010. His own marriage ran astray because his wife and him '…just couldn't stop fighting'. They separated in 2011, when he was 63 and his wife 59. He attributed this to the poverty that was brought about by cheap Chinese imports and he and his wife's inability to cope with their circumstances:

> 'We were all so upbeat when the ANC came into power in 1994. Our success was proof of them doing good for the country. But we had no idea they were selling us out to the Chinese'.

In the case of the white-collar worker, his employers were manufacturers of track suits and T-shirts. They had employed 'more than 150 workers, mainly Indian', and had clients throughout the country, including major chain stores. The business began in 1960, although he started working for the firm from about March 1988. As sales manager 'for outer-Durban orders', his job was to serve as a liaison person to retail stores in the KwaZulu-Natal province. He had, however, helped when he was needed for orders in other parts of the country. In the 1990s, they had to turn out a minimum of 50,000 track suits and 100,000 T-shirts per month, amidst other products, to keep pace with country-wide orders. By the year 1999, they had to retrench 30% of their staff and by 2002 their orders shrunk to a point where they had to retrench more than 90% of their staff, including my informant because, as he stated: 'the orders had dried up'. His employers, he said,

> 'had kept the premises because they owned it, they still had enough money to invest elsewhere, and could reinvent their business skills to meet the changing economic needs'.

He remained out of paid employment for the next three years. While his savings sustained him during this period, his wife began making and marketing Indian savouries and roti. But, by then, this had become a saturated market and the profits they made from this activity only allowed them to meet incidental expenses. Their growing need for survival and to meet the costs for their children's education forced them to compromise their quality of life and accept employment at lower than preferred wages. His wife became employed in a take-out cum bakery, compromising her status as a housewife; he got a job in motor car parts sales outlet for half of what he used to earn. His status was a distinctive drop from white to pink collar status. Although their combined incomes ensured their survival and provided money for their children's studies, they were unable to save anything. 'Our existence', he said, 'has been from hand to mouth since the closure of the factory. I can only hope that our children can educate themselves and get us out of this rut'.

The third respondent was an employee in a curtain manufacturing and fabric business that started in the late 1980s, where he and his wife sewed curtains. They, too, became victims of unemployment by 2004, when their employer could no longer source the South African made curtain material that he used to. Initially, from about 2001, he was happy to buy Chinese-made material because it was substantially cheaper. But too many clients returned to his shop claiming that the material was tearing too easily for a range of reasons. Two of such reasons related to the quality of the material. Apparently, the curtains tore too easily when they were drawn in the mornings and evenings and that they were unable to absorb the sunlight, causing them to turn brittle and crumple and then tear easily. It was when two clients threatened his employer with violence, and later one assaulted him, and others threatened to spread a negative word about his services that he decided to close down his business. Fifteen employees were retrenched and the owner has not been able to establish another sustainable business; allegedly, the employer tried at least four businesses ever since they closed the curtain and fabric business, but none of them were successful. My informant remarked, 'There was a time when we envied our boss because we thought he was so rich, but today he is just like us'. He and his wife sought employment in two different shops as counter assistants, earning substantially less than what they could have earned as sewers of curtains. Their incomes are supplemented by sewing, alterations and stitching during the evenings and weekends, but only for people who know them well enough and who are patient enough not to pressurise them to deliver with immediacy. It is their strategy to ensure an extra income without the stress of being abused or threatened by clients.

In each of the instances discussed above, the impact on a personal and familial level was significant. The closure of businesses, loss of jobs, compromises and being forced to accept what came first at substantially lower wages had taken a destructive toll on family life, self-confidence and the identities that individuals acquired through their businesses or the work that they were qualified to do. The cumulative impact was disorientating and destructive to home-grown businesses and disruptive to individual and family stability. Lyman (2005) brought to attention the increasing imports from China into South Africa since 1996, which grew to 80% of imports by the end of 2004. For every 100 T-shirts that were imported into South Africa, 80 were from China. By the end of 2002, at least 75,000 jobs were lost in the textile industry, forcing the trade unions, industrialists and church leaders to appeal to the state for protectionist legislation. On 27 June 2005, they also engaged on a nationwide strike. It is against the background of these interviews that the rise of China's influence in Africa, albeit the rest of the world as well, needs to be understood.

China's Repositioning of Foreign Policy and Its Meaning for Africa

China began opening up its economy in the mid-1980s. By the first five years of the twenty-first century, China's productivity had risen to make it the seventh largest economy in the world (OECD 2003). By the year 2012, the USA's gross domestic product value was at 15 trillion US dollars and the Chinese stood at five trillion US dollars, constituting a significant rise in the latter's GDP value.

Only Japan and South Korea had experienced such rapid and sustained economic growth during the post-war period in the twentieth century. However, neither Japan nor South Korea adopted a stance of mass overproduction of cheap manufactured goods, ranging from household and personal requirements to industrial machines and equipment, for the sake of export. Chinese goods have acquired a reputation for western style finishes and packaging that is often cheap but attractive, constituting a subtle form of coercion to purchase because of the low prices.

It was a creativity that Chinese strategists found wanting after their growing isolation that was brought about by the massacre of protesters in Tiananmen Square, Beijing, in 1989. The challenges they had to face through the waning and eventual collapse of the socialist cum communist systems in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), Yugoslavia and Eastern Europe were enormous. By June 1989, amid regular protests for a more transparent and democratic Chinese political economy, Tiananmen Square came to symbolise a popular discontent that remains latent in the country. Such latency is often shown by regular demonstrations in the island of Hong Kong where Chinese rule cannot so easily displace the liberal traditions that the islanders acquired through British rule. On 4 June 1989, mobilisation efforts attracted up to a million students and workers to Tiananmen Square. All were unarmed and many went on a fast unto death unless the state agreed to a dialogue with them. However big the protest and whatever determination the protesters showed was irrelevant to a political bureaucracy that demonstrated total aversion to the protesters' calls for a freer society. Reaction by the Chinese authorities was swift and brutal. Their use of the police and military with carte blanche decisions to be made on the ground by themselves produced an almost immediate asphyxiation of the movement, but at the cost of a number of lives. To date, there are still no records about how many died or were permanently injured by the state's actions, as the call made by USA's ex-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Hillary Clinton, informs us. That this led to the almost immediate isolation of China by western countries was a reflection of the seriousness of brutality of the attacks against unarmed civilians. While the nature of the sanctions against China varied, they were designed to have an impact on both its internal and external policies. High level diplomatic visits, sale of police and military equipment, transfer of advanced technologies and export credits were stopped. Through increased pressure by the USA and friendly states in Europe, the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank stopped loans to China (Harding 1990).

China's responses to this isolation were subtle and adaptive. Their accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) was one way of demonstrating to the western world their desire to take cognisance of their need to change and at least to meet partially the demand for democracy, but without consultation with those who called for dialogue. This has had a twofold effect of China's lessening state intervention and extending private engagements within its domestic economy, as well as cautiously and selectively opening its systems to new technologies and market disciplines that are in sync with neo-liberal tendencies (OECD 2003).

The choice of terms with which countries operationalise their engagements are almost always intended to signify the positive between two nations or among the many that may group together in emerging relations. Whether they are noted as geo-political alliances, strategic partnerships or cooperative relationships, history over the last two centuries has shown that one country is generally the hegemonic force over however many may enter into that relationship. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it was the imperialist tendencies of the British and the French over much of

Africa, the Spanish in most of South America and, to a lesser extent, the Portuguese, Belgians and Germans in Africa and other parts of the world. Since the late twentieth century, the Chinese liberalisation of their economy has sought to move outwards and connect to the global economy through Regional Trade Agreements (RTAs) and Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnerships (RCEPs), as well as to the Transatlanic Trade and Investment Partnership (TPP). While China has begun to integrate into these forums, their lack of a consistent policy remains an inhibitive factor for them. He (2016), for instance, describes how China took ten years to adapt to the dynamics of the WTO and how they continue to play a mediocre role in it.

But for the volume of its productivity and the extent of trade with countries throughout the world China needed to create a convincing image for itself. African countries have become major trading partners to China's global economic strategy, to the point that its trade in the continent has surpassed that of the USA. China's forays into Africa since the 2000s has been unprecedented. For instance, the USA's foreign direct investment (FDI) in Africa has been stagnant at 1%, the whole China's FDI stands at 3-4%. In 2013, the real terms of USA's trade in Africa stood at 85 billion US dollars, while China's trade with African countries in 2012 stood at 200 billion US dollars (Gadzala 2015).

In 2006, during the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation summit in Beijing, 48 states were welcomed into a city brightly decorated with African iconography. Central Beijing was abuzz with picturesque buntings of country specific and broader African themes. That the Chinese government was to bring together so many African heads of state who are often acrimonious with one another as neighbours was not only a major diplomatic feat but it also raised several crucial questions about the motives of the event. It has become obvious that the Chinese quest for African natural resources, especially in the energy sector, is foremost in their economic strategic planning (Krauss 2010, Bracken et al. 2013). While China consumed at least 17% of the world's energy resources by 2010, after depleting much of its own, its needs are likely to increase by 75% more by 2035. According to Marks (2006) and Bennet (2007), increased diplomatic relations between China and African nations have made prevalent at least three important questions. Can China positively replace the exploitative past of colonialism and current neo-colonial tendencies of western countries? What are China's motives in this pattern of rapidly increasing investments and diplomatic missions in the continent? And how sustainable are China's political relations and economic activities in Africa?

The Chinese have been proactive on this front. Through their use of soft power phenomena, their multilateral extensions in investments to all continents have a persuasive humanitarian front. In a United Nations (UN) Summit in September 2005, held to commemorate its sixtieth anniversary, then Chinese President Hu Jintao offered a detailed elaboration on his concept of a 'Harmonious World'. Three aspects made up his vision for the realisation of his approach:

- Multilateralism and common security;
- Cooperation based on mutual benefit to realise common prosperity;
- Construction of a harmonious world based on tolerance and mutual acceptance.

Through this three-pronged approach for a 'harmonious world', Hu Jintao's efforts were actually intended to replace two major stalwarts in China's gradual rise to power: Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping. First was Mao Zedong's three-world policy, which in the 1970s placed Russia at the helm of the Chinese enemy list. In spite of China and Russia sharing much through a common communist ideology, Mao Zedong preferred to enter into treaties with western style democracies, such as the USA and Japan. Central to these treaties were an apparent commitment to break away from historical constrictions that enslaved the developing world through international agreements. On 12 August 1978, Zedong signed a Sino-Japanese peace and friendship treaty with the Fukuda government, which included an emphasis on an anti-hegemony clause; and on 16 December 1978 Zedong extended Chinese international relations to the USA by establishing formal diplomatic relations and once again reaffirming an anti-hegemony clause (Cheng 2016: 14). In June 1989, the Tiananmen Square episode placed the then Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping in an awkward position. Growing western isolation and the crumbling of the East European Socialist states brought about a statesmanship approach that was calm, but equally subtle and calculating. Xiaoping asserted to the Politburo that China should keep a low profile in international politics. Several years later many scholars began questioning the wisdom of China's low profile in international politics, reminding themselves of the *taoguang yanghui-youso zuowei* (keep a low profile) debate. This debate revolved around the concerns expressed by Chinese foreign policy advisers during the late 1990s and early 2000s about the 'growing China-threat' as their influence grew in Latin America, Africa and South Asia. The Pew Global Attitudes Survey had reported a sharp increase in concern in 2004 about China's rise in global economics and trade. China's 'damage control' measure was to engage in an international drive to present a positive image of itself through a soft power marketing approach, but in a measured way. Deng Xiaoping's advice was exemplary:

> 'In short, my views about the international situation can be summed up in three sentences. First, we should observe the situation coolly. Second, we should hold our ground. Third, we should act calmly. Don't be impatient; it is no good to be impatient. We should be calm, calm and calm again and we should immerse ourselves in practical work to accomplish something, something for China' (quoted in Glaser and Murphy 2009: 18-19).

Deng Xiaoping's cautiousness was rapidly replaced by Hu Jintao's outward thrust, asserting that Chinese internal needs could only be satisfied by what the external world has to offer.

While China could no longer be ignored, African states have demonstrated a mixed reaction varying from wantonness to caution about wanting to engage too closely with China. Distinct differences emerged in African countries between officials and ordinary people who felt affected by rising Chinese influence in their countries. Unlike the World Bank and International Monetary Fund who now place conditions among their requirements for aid transparency in the development projects, China avoids such conditions (Lyman 2005). Many opportunistic and repressive governments in the African continent are content with the Chinese approach, although their respective populations do not feel the same way. Their reactions about Chinese investments and their political leadership's accommodationist attitude are on public record. In South Africa, popular reactions provide some insight into how future relations with Africa's largest economy could possibly shape up with the world's fastest growing economy — China.

Populist Debates in South Africa

Understanding populist debates in South Africa about Chinese investment requires appropriate contextualisation viewed against the reactions in other parts of the continent. What transpires in South Africa is widely followed in other parts of the African continent. Recent literature on the subject covers the growing presence of China and the attitudes, impacts and populism that is beginning to emerge as a consequence of development trajectories across the continent (Marks 2006, Glaser and Murphy 2009, Gumede 2013, Hanauer and Morris 2014, Hess and Aidoo 2015, Carmody 2011). Media reporting sometimes crystallises what academics are trying to say in more substantive ways. An article on 20 April 2011 in *The Economist* started with a captivating caption that read thus: 'Africans are asking whether China is making their lunch or eating it'. It began with an account on a Mr Zhu, a shoemaker from Foshan, near Hong Kong, whose first visit to Kenya saw his notebook filled with orders and a promise for future business in the continent. Many African politicians were complimentary about how Chinese trade was helping to build infrastructure and erode poverty on the continent. Mr Zhu recorded the warmth with which he was received and the positive future that China had with African trade. But in his second visit three years later, he was met with attitudes that had changed significantly, although his business still thrived. Many who traded with him accused him of unethical practice and poor-quality goods. Similar perceptions have consolidated in neighbouring countries as well. Chinese goods and workmanship are being held up as shoddy work. For instance, in Angola's capital city Luanda, a hospital that opened with great fanfare was closed within a year because wide cracks began appearing and threatened the entire building (*Global Times* 2010). The hospital cost 8 million dollars and was built by the China Overseas Engineering Group Company. Finance for the project was from Beijing, with the Ministry of Commerce taking direct responsibility in overseeing the investigation into the causes of the cracks in the building. To avoid any further human catastrophe, the authorities accommodated patients in outside tents close to the hospital building. In Lusaka, Zambia's capital, close to the town of Chirundu, a 130-kilometre road built by a Chinese firm was washed away by the rains. A derogatory comment by a Zambian citizen captured the mood of the common people's questions against Chinese investment in their country:

> 'MMD circus now showing in theatres – that's what you get for over believing in foreign investors. Did those Chinese put any concrete under that road? Looks like they just did a surface job. My daughter sings the song "the foolish man built his house on sand, and when the rains came down it went CRASH!" Next time, hire South Africans; they build good roads. Better still, hire Zambian engineers in the diaspora to do the job; I'm sure they would love a few months working holiday in Zambia' (*Lusaka Times*, 20 March 2009).

Loss of confidence in Chinese engineering caused a rethink among Zambia's politicians, who called in the services of the World Bank. The importance of this road lay in its export-import trade connections with South Africa and Zimbabwe to the south and the Democratic Republic, Great Lakes Region and Tanzania to the north. It was a dangerous road, with only temporary relief provided by Chinese engineers. It was referred to as *Kapili Ngozi* (Hills of Danger) by Zambians. Concern about its conditions echoed throughout the country and the neighbouring countries. By May 2015, The World Bank Group rehabilitated at least 100 of the 135-kilometre road at a cost of 81 million US dollars (The World Bank 2014).

Hess and Aidoo (2015: 2) provide a comprehensive account of how populist debates in Africa have arisen because of questionable ethics in the relations between the Chinese state and national governments in numerous African countries, including Zambia, Ghana, South Africa and Ethiopia, Sudan and Ghana. Focus on each country is spaced out in separate chapters, each giving detailed accounts of how popular agitation against Chinese presence in Africa is growing and serving as important foci for political mobilisation against the respective governments. While African governments still tend to hold on to western governments and others such as Japan, the perceptive and real problems with the Chinese appear to be complex and challenging. They bring to our attention that leaders in the West and in Africa, human rights monitors, civil society organisations and the media have criticised the Chinese over a number of issues. The range of accusations are not different from the exploitative records of the colonial past: poor working conditions and low wages paid by Chinese firms, corrupt business practices by Chinese entrepreneurs and African officials and Beijing's propping up of pariah African states with poor human rights records. Hess and Aidoo (2015) have extensively covered the contradictions between Chinese foreign policy 'sweet talk' and the realities of exploitative tendencies in actual business practice in Africa. *The Economist* convincingly stated that every country south of Rwanda has robust debates about 'Chinese exploitation'. Even in relatively quiet countries like Namibia workers allegedly have been complaining about the 'raw deal' that Chinese firms have been giving them; while in Zambia a major trade union leader has made Sino-scepticism his major rallying point against state policies and preferential treatment for Chinese investors (The *Economis*t 2011).

China is on record of giving more loans to developing countries than the World Bank over the past decade and a half. But, while Chinese rhetoric continues along the lines of 'non-interference' in internal affairs of the countries they deal with in Africa, Chinese economic development aid is tied to government loans in similar fashion to the aid regime of the Bretton Woods Institutions of western countries led by the USA (Hanauer and Morris 2014). However, the current leadership in South Africa do not view Chinese conditions as inhibiting. The General-Secretary of the ANC is quoted as saying:

> 'Western investors have to realise that South Africa does not need their money since it can turn to China and India.'

This official position has wider appeal among African bureaucrats outside South Africa, as *The Economist* (2011) reveals, African political leaderships often play Western donor agencies against the Chinese. But, as Kaigwa and Wu's (2015: 159) research reveals, this is not a popular position within civil society. The 2013 online survey about African perceptions of Chinese business practices conducted by the Ethics Institute of South Africa found that out of 1056 respondents across 15 African countries most were least enthusiastic about doing business with Chinese firms, while Kenyans were the most enthusiastic. Kaigwa and Wu's (2015) close analysis of the responses in conjunction with social media texting found that South African civilian responses were more critical of their own political leadership than of the Chinese. In one of the responses, they quote a derogatory text about the Ph.D. of South Africa's (now ex-) State President, Jacob Zuma. Zuma was unpopular for his lack of tertiary education; the text read, 'Zuma has a Ph.D. Made in China'.

Academic Responses

A central question to ask about the opposition against the South African state and China business dealings would be: 'From what does such antagonism stem?' Part of a response to this question is answered in Bond and Zapiro's (2004) coverage of the ANC's continuous use of leftist language to explain their reform efforts while capitulating to neo-liberal ideology. Their analysis of South Africa's frustrated post-apartheid reform efforts is complimented by a number of analyses that extend upon the contradictions that they bring out in their work. Wilcox and Van Seventer (2005: 211), for instance, state that while South Africa has been exporting base metals and mineral products, China has been exporting cheaper but huge quantities of textiles, clothing and footwear. South Africa is now exporting fewer advanced manufactured goods than it used to in 1993, the year prior to African majority rule. China, on the other hand, they argue, has been exporting greater quantities of advanced goods to South Africa. Martin (2008: 129) added to this expose by discussing how South Africa is under pressure from the East in terms of sophisticated manufactured goods. A stagnancy appears to have embraced South African manufacturing because exports to Africa since 1998 have remained unchanged at 13% to 14%, while exports to immediate neighbouring countries in the South African Development Community (SADC) have declined to around 10% of South Africa's total exports (See also Carmody 2011: 241). It is in relation to statistics such as these that agitation against the state's liaison with China and membership of BRICS translates into irksomeness. Cognisant of this situation, Julius Malema, expelled member of the ANC and now leader of the Economic Freedom Front (EFF) that opposed South Africa joining BRICS, asserted:

> 'People use us to get into Africa, take mineral resources raw as they are and leave South Africa and Africa…The Chinese are number one in doing that…It is just making us vulnerable' (Gumede 2013).

Conclusion

There are two levels at which China's rhetoric of non-interference must be examined more widely. The first is the accusation that so many in Africa are beginning to raise about bribing officials and politicians to ensure their continued access to natural resources. If China has really exhausted or nearly exhausted much of their own natural resources, then sustainability of service delivery for the world's largest population is likely to be jeopardised unless alternative sources are found. And if claims of bribery of officials and politicians are true, then the ways in which benefits are paid would need to be known if they are to be authenticated. Whether claims of bribery are true or false, one prominent aspect is that there are huge discrepancies between how African officials positively respond to Chinese investments in the continent and how those most negatively affected by their presence view this. Having to pay low prices for food and household items to effect savings in running a home is a universal norm. People all over the world have this inherent tendency to keep their expenses within their budgets and to be indebted at manageable levels. But when goods that are significantly cheaper enter a market and upset its home-grown dynamics, then it must be a reflection of the state and the extent to which its policies are designed to protect the local population. When businesses are forced into closure and people lose their jobs *en-masse*, it is only right for the local populations and political strategists to question it. In South Africa, as the case studies by ex-entrepreneurs and ex-employees reveal, it was cheap Chinese goods that led to the closure of so many locally-owned businesses and the loss of so many jobs. The awarding of contracts to build roads and hospitals that fail and the flooding of markets by cheap foreign goods do not merely displace local entrepreneurs, robbing them of their livelihoods; they also constitute a form of interference with local expertise and markets. A fundamental question emerges out of this: 'Who is more responsible for this kind of situation: Is it Chinese foreign investment policy or is it the national politicians who are to blame for allowing such levels of immersion into their economies in the first instance?' An analysis of social media responses in South Africa on this issue and the subtleties directed against the country's politicians are the more likely answers to this question. Unemployment and a relegation to lower economic statuses are unlikely to allow the Chinese concept of a harmonious world to manifest in homes where the breakdown of inter-personal relations can be directed straight at the cheap goods that are imported from China. Equally complicit are the politicians that support such disturbances to local investments.

There is an obvious inconsistency between China's rhetoric of non-interference, preceded by Hu Jintao's concept of 'Harmonious World', and the nature of its impact in countries where their cheap produce affects the stability of local markets and peoples' productive capacities. African politicians and officials need to be more accountable to their citizens about how such international agreements are made, especially when the long-term effects are devastating to both local economic conditions and to domestic social relations. If they are not personally benefiting from such agreements, then why allow overseas investments to wreak such havoc with local communities? When more research can reveal the alleged connection between bribery and investment between the Chinese state and African officials, then China's slogan of non-interference will be proven to be more rhetoric than reality.

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