

Business Standard, 12 November 2014

China's Second Continent:
How a Million Migrants are Building a New Empire in Africa
Howard W French
Knopf, New York, 2014
(Pages 285+xi, \$27.95)

In Namibia in 2000, and later in Suriname in 2004, I encountered and chatted with Chinese migrant families in the country interior, running small supermarkets and petty trading shops. It seemed remarkable that anyone should want to uproot themselves from their homes to for such singularly alien locations. This remarkable book, from an author who knows China and speaks the language, is based on extensive travels across Africa, blending detailed narratives of hardy Chinese adventurers, with analysis of the larger picture.

A startling fact in the introduction compels attention: more than a million Chinese migrants have moved to Africa, largely through autonomous actions – and Mr. French notes this figure may be conservative. This counters the image of state driven machination, but behind it is a calculating state that facilitates this migration, with long-term objectives. A former African minister is quoted to affirm that China flexes its economic muscle to tell African countries: when we do so much for you, we expect your immigration rules will not be applied strictly to migrants from China. Other African interlocutors affirm that just as Europeans had taken their wealth, the Chinese too demand favors, in the shape of contracts for projects and favorable resource deals, and easing the entry of their migrants. Consider the numbers: Mozambique is said to host 100,000 Chinese. Windhoek in Namibia has anywhere between 10,000, to 40,000. Some of them tell the author that they would like to go back, but many more are determined to stay on, appreciative of an easier, less corruption dominated life in their adopted homes, compared with China.

The author writes of days spent with Chinese pioneer investors, traders and aid workers, whether working on a land project in Mozambique, a rudimentary but effective copper smelting process in Zambia or an agricultural center in Liberia. Their pervasive prejudices towards Africans animate the book. In Zambia China purchased the huge Chambishi copper mine that had become defunct through local mismanagement, for a mere \$20 million in 1997 when that country put into effect its privatization program; in recent years in Guinea and elsewhere, long-term mineral supply arrangements have been worked out with the China International Fund, in lieu of China building infrastructure and prestige projects. In Freetown in 2003, just as Nigerian peacekeeping forces moved into Sierra Leone, Chinese investors moved in and bought the hollow shell of the luxury

Bintumani Hotel, at a fire-sale price. That marked the start of the takeover of the country's mining industry.

A persisting mystery is China's investment in farmland. Africa has 60% of the world's uncultivated arable farmland. But the story of what China has done is unclear; in Mali for instance, some of the land taken over has been leased back to Africans to cultivate. The author does not delve in the agriculture story, noting only that some Chinese settlers work in agriculture – he does not travel to the Horn of Africa or Madagascar, often mentioned in this context.

The book recounts a backlash that is emerging against this, in the realization that in return for 'easy money' vital resources are being given away, and in the process the governments 'avoid sound decisions'. African civil society figures are speaking out, not via anti-Chinese positions, but asking questions that indicate that 'the optics surrounding its (China's) presence are changing'. In particular, what becomes increasingly evident is lack of technology transfer, and the fact that the agreements concluded rest on narrow support from local ruling regimes, bought off with bribes, and lacking transparency.

A \$3 billion aid package for Ghana, announced in 2012 is analyzed in detail. A Ghanaian economist closely associated with it points out that the projects to be implemented are drawn up by China, taking into account the capability of their companies for execution, essentially to serve their interests. There is no analysis of risk, or cost-benefit, or whether what is offered fits into their own strategic vision or real goals; but the recipient also knows that no country has offered anything similar. Interesting facts emerge: Beijing decides which Chinese companies bid for which kind of projects in a place such as Mali, and the host country has little say even in the choice of projects.

One major conclusion: 'The timeline for resource depletion is running in tandem with the continent's unprecedented demographic explosion'. The book argues that in 40 years Africa's population will have doubled, when its natural resources will have mainly been depleted. Some of us remember similar apocryphal forecasts by the Club of Rome in the 1970s. For one thing, most of Africa is still unprospected in its mineral resources. The population explosion is real, but it seems premature to prognosticate how African states be will handle that key governance challenge.

The book's overall conclusion: China's Africa actions are not radically different from Africa's history with other foreign influences. It 'is the latest chapter in a very long narrative of empire construction through migration'.

For an Indian a different thought emerges. We lack today such adventurist migrants, willing to 'eat bitterness'. We had such pioneers in East Africa and elsewhere a century back, when a Nanji Kalidas Mehta worked as a tea-boy in Kenya, and went on to found a business dynasty. We have the globally spread

Chandaria family that commenced with and retain manufacture bases in Africa, among the leaders in corporate governance. India's strength is in development projects that are smaller, but better focused, balanced and mindful of local interests. With around \$6 to 8 billion in the pipeline, it has its own real impact. That story waits telling.

Endnote: a Chinese interlocutor tells the author not to go to any place where there are no Chinese. Why, asks the author, are such places too dangerous? The reply: wrong; those are places where it is impossible to make money.

Kishan S Rana

The reviewer is a former diplomat, teacher, honorary fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi; kishanrana@gmail.com