

## The Chinese Invade Africa

IAN JOHNSON 09.25.14



Zacharias Abubeker/AFP/Getty Images

Ethiopian and Chinese workers of the China Communication Construction Company sit at the site of the Addis Ababa-Adama toll road on May 5, 2014.

In early May, China's premier, Li Keqiang, made a trip to Africa that raised a central question about China's rise: What effect will it have on the world's poorer countries? As a big third-world country that has lifted hundreds of millions out of poverty in just a few decades—and has risen so fast that it's easily the only serious challenger to the United States' superpower status—China has enormous cachet, with lessons that many countries are eager to learn. But as the trip showed, those lessons are complex and ambiguous.

Premier Li visited four countries and the headquarters of the African Union in Addis Ababa. He pledged billions of dollars in new aid, promised to share technology, and unveiled a series of much-publicized deals, including a nine-hundred-mile railway line in Nigeria and a research center to help link major African capitals by rail. Li urged African leaders and Chinese companies that China—already Africa's largest trading partner—should double its trade with Africa by 2020 and quadruple its investment there.

For the better part of a decade, these sorts of headlines have caused distress among nongovernmental organizations and in Western capitals. Groups such as Human Rights Watch have detailed labor abuses and shown how China's limits on free speech at home have been exported abroad, especially to dependent states in regions like Africa.<sup>1</sup> The economic ties are sometimes portrayed as under-the-table deals cut between Beijing and corrupt leaders in Africa. Instead of helping to build civil society, these deals are said to hurt Africa's long-term interests, reinforcing the tendency of corrupt elites to secure resources at a low price.

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### Reviewed in This Article

#### *China's Second Continent: How a Million Migrants Are Building a New Empire in Africa*

by Howard W. French  
Knopf, 285 pp.

[Author Interview with Howard French in our Books section](#)

#### *China's Congo Plan: What the Economic Superpower Sees in the World's Poorest Nation*

by Jacob Kushner

Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting, 42 pp.

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In early August, President Barack Obama welcomed delegates from fifty African states to the White House. It was the largest-ever summit between the continent and the United States, although China has been holding similar conferences every three years for over a decade. And as if to undercut Li's visit, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry visited Africa a few days earlier than Li. He talked up trade but he also warned against corruption and censorship—the sort of advice that some African leaders are happy not to hear from China.

Chinese and some foreign commentators argue that the West's support for corporate responsibility, human rights, and efficient development aid is, at best, rather sudden, if not downright hypocritical, in view of the West's decades of colonialism, support of dictators, and resource grabs by its own large corporations. In an English-language commentary during Li's visit in May, the government's Xinhua news agency wrote that China was providing Africa with the infrastructure it needs—the sort of roads, rails, and schools that underpinned China's rise over the past four decades:

Biased people in the West tend to see China, a late comer to Africa, as a rising contender and smear it as the new colonist that snatches natural resources to fit its own development agenda as Western powers did centuries ago. Such misgivings only attest to the West's poor knowledge about the real story of the China-Africa cooperation.

But in comments aimed more for domestic consumption, Chinese leaders also nodded toward some of their critics' concerns. During his visit, Premier Li met with Chinese employees of state firms working in Angola. This oil-rich country has been the site of heavy Chinese investment, and Li promised that the interests of the local Chinese would be protected. Cutting the ribbon at a new Chinese center for its overseas workers, he said that though far away from China, they were in everyone's thoughts. But then he went on to warn them not to give China a bad image by being too cutthroat, insular, and disrespectful. According to a Chinese report of Li's comments on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, he added:

As Chinese companies and people develop abroad, even though they're swimming in the big lake of market economics, it isn't a zero-sum game. Both sides should benefit. Only then can we have a rich outcome. We have to unite the lives of Chinese and local people. Chinese companies and people should abide by local laws and respect local traditions, carrying out to the utmost social responsibilities and protecting China's image.

Li's choice of Angola to make such a statement probably wasn't a coincidence. Eight years ago, China and Angola pioneered deals that would be emulated in many other African countries, sometimes with the same unhappy endings. Starting in the early 2000s, China secured rights to sell Angolan oil in exchange for billions of dollars in credit that the Angolan government can use to buy Chinese infrastructure. But instead of hiring locals, China imported tens of thousands of workers. Resentment and violence flared, with local armed gangs attacking Chinese companies and expatriates. Chinese gangs also got involved, setting up extortion and prostitution rings, which led to dozens of arrests.

All of this was diametrically opposite to Li's message of a mutually beneficial engagement between a once-poor country and poor countries on their way up. Which was accurate?

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**T**rying to figure out China's true intentions in Africa has resulted in a cottage industry of analysts, writers, and bloggers investigating just how much aid China provides (foreign aid is a state secret in China), as well as whether the

pledges, memoranda of understanding, and so on really are panning out, or are just empty announcements designed to give meaning to the barrage of summits and visits between Chinese and African heads of state. Their conclusions can be confusingly different, with some arguing that China is a new imperialist power and others seeing a more benevolent approach that, at worst, is no different from Western policies.

Howard French's new book, *China's Second Continent: How a Million Migrants Are Building a New Empire in Africa*, takes a different tack, giving us a bottom-up look at China in Africa. A former *New York Times* Africa and China correspondent, he is fluent in Chinese, French, and Spanish, enabling him to speak directly to many of the people involved. He doesn't bypass the pundits and analysts, but tries as much as possible to let the Africans and Chinese speak for themselves as he travels through fifteen countries. The result is a rich, complex, and satisfyingly contradictory look at this strange marriage.

French sets his story in broad terms, helping to convey its relevance to general readers. He points out that when China began its ascent in the 1970s, it was during an earlier phase of globalization that primarily involved Western countries developing export industries in poorer countries, mostly in Asia, but also in Latin America and Eastern Europe. In other words, it was globalization carried out on the West's terms.

Now we are in an era when rising powers like China, and to a lesser degree India and Brazil, are investing heavily in one another—and other countries down the food chain. China, writes French, is “rapidly emerging as the most important agent of economic change in broad swaths of the world.” China uses Africa as a proving ground for its companies, most of which are not quite ready to take on their Western competitors on their home turf, but which can provide Africans with robust, low-cost alternatives.

Although China's foray into Africa has been a staple of media reports for the past decade, it's worth pausing to consider just how dramatic this change is. When China first entered Africa in the 1960s, it was something of a curiosity, positioning itself as a fellow victim of imperialism, a socialist brother, or a provider of modest, low-end technology. Generally, though, it did little more than build the odd showpiece factory or railway line—good deeds to complement a kind of missionary Maoism not unlike the religious and ideological opportunism that drew Europeans to Africa in earlier eras. When China launched its economic reforms in the late 1970s, it was more concerned with its own development, and although engagement with Africa didn't disappear, it was minimal.

That began to change in the 1990s, as China increased its aid to Africa, culminating in the triennial 2006 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation in Beijing. Delegates from forty-eight countries attended, and the Chinese capital was lined with billboards hailing “Amazing Africa.” China pledged to double aid within three years and suddenly the world woke up to the fact that Africa had a new suitor besides the two chief colonial masters, Britain and France, and the winner of the cold war, the United States. China's export-import bank estimated that it would provide \$20 billion in loans during the three years after the forum, while the World Bank planned \$17 billion.<sup>2</sup>

But it's another statistic that underpins French's reportage: one million. This is the number of Chinese that French reckons are active in Africa today, not only as guest workers building the continent's telecommunications or transport infrastructure, but also including thousands of ordinary people who see Africa as a land of opportunity. For Westerners, Africa is mostly a series of kleptocracies, natural disasters, violent conflicts, and public health crises like the recent outbreak of the Ebola virus in West Africa. But for many Chinese, Africa is an underpopulated region of forests, plains, and

seemingly fallow lands, a vast continent (three times larger than China) of just one billion people that, in some places, is starting to grow quickly. As French sees it, we are in the midst of a “historic movement of Chinese to Africa.”

One of French’s most colorful chapters is set in Mozambique, where he finds a Chinese pioneer farmer named Hao who is determined not only to build a homestead, but to start a clan that will be part of the country’s economic takeoff. He has brought over two sons whom he wants to set up with local women. Hao hopes they will marry, procreate, and establish a clan of economic titans with vast holdings of land that can only be dreamed of in overcrowded, highly regulated China. It seems delusional, but is it more so than the white homesteaders of earlier eras?

French is extremely open-minded. He tells us that he’s here to challenge the stereotype of Chinese being insular and clannish, and to show how many are excited about Africa. Examples like Hao help make this point about how outgoing and entrepreneurial Chinese can be, although French’s reporting is good enough to let us make up our own minds. Personally, I saw Hao as almost a caricature of a Han chauvinist, spewing racial stereotypes about the locals and treating the women like walking receptacles for his sons’ semen. Not surprisingly, the local women seemed to hate him, and I wondered how long he could last out there on the range, with so little empathy or understanding for local people. French isn’t as judgmental, and as readers we are probably better for it.

Time and again, French introduces us to risk-taking Chinese. We meet the manager of a copper smelter in Zambia, small shop owners in Mali, and a suave businessman in Guinea whose fluent French puts American diplomats to shame. French takes us on epic road trips through the bush and sprawling cities, and along the way we encounter boosters and critics of China’s growing engagement. He doesn’t come down as hard on the Chinese as some Western critics do, but he talks to enough African skeptics and boorish Chinese that some readers can find plenty of evidence for why China is probably likely to be held at arm’s length in Africa, just as Western powers are.

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A theme that runs through French’s book is that parts of Africa are prospering. He cites the oft-used statistic that Africa’s middle class is 300 million, which is staggering. Not all people agree with this figure, however, and the definition is quite low—applying to those who spend between \$2 and \$20 per day, though about 60 percent of this group spend only between \$2 and \$4 a day. Most of those who earn more live in the oil-rich countries of North Africa.<sup>3</sup>

And yet French takes us to so many places, and we meet so many Chinese enthralled with Africa’s opportunities, that he convinces us that Africa is rising, perhaps not quite as dramatically as China was a generation earlier, but still on the way up. He also makes one consider China’s point of view, which is that if it practices a kind of mercenary mercantilism, its engagement with Africa is at least honest. It wants to make money and figures that if Africans can achieve governments that are halfway competent, they’ll figure out how to make money too and lift themselves out of poverty.

This is how China itself escaped poverty. Suspicious of their intentions, China never welcomed NGOs, while foreign aid to China was limited (and now mostly has been phased out). This meant that China does not have the culture of nongovernmental organizations found in many African countries. NGOs such as Amnesty International, for example, are barred from working in China, while many others have very small operations in China that are sharply curtailed. In a way, its engagement with Africa is the same as its blueprint for its own country: grow, grow, grow, and sort out the rest

later. It's easy to see why many Africans might be exhilarated by this, especially if they are in the elite and stand to benefit from the new projects.

Another take on China in Africa is provided by Jacob Kushner in his e-book *China's Congo Plan: What the Economic Superpower Sees in the World's Poorest Nation*, which was published by the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting, a Washington-based foundation that supports investigative journalism. Kushner's book is smaller—about forty-odd pages—and it focuses on just one country. But like French, Kushner is fair-minded and has invested much time and effort in figuring out the interplay between the new superpower and a poor but strategically important African country.

China's way of doing business in Congo is typical of many other parts of Africa. It secures hugely profitable mineral rights in exchange for setting up infrastructure projects. Based on their experience over the past few decades, China's leaders believe that such projects, more than anything, help reduce poverty. Roads mean access to markets, rail means products can get to ports, and schools mean the creation of a literate workforce that can take advantage of the new opportunities.

In Congo's case, the government's plan is to pay for such infrastructure by guaranteeing China access to 6.8 million tons of copper and 427,000 tons of cobalt over the next twenty-five years. At current market prices those minerals are worth between \$40 and \$84 billion, or two to four times Congo's current GDP. The output will be sold on the market, with two Chinese companies getting two thirds of the profits and the one Congolese company getting one third.

In addition, China is building roads, hospitals, and universities that Congo decided it wanted. The projects were not chosen by Western aid advisers imposing their ideas of what would best help local people. The projects are worth \$3 billion—not gifts, but loans to be repaid with the profits from the mines.

In some ways this is a bad deal. It could be better for Congo to take the profits and put the projects up for open bidding. But the Chinese approach guarantees that something will get done. As one Congo official told Kushner:

It's been 50 years that we've cooperated with the IMF, the World Bank. And for 50 years we've had the same problem. There aren't roads. There aren't schools. There aren't universities.

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Two problems, though, arise. One is that many Chinese infrastructure projects have a reputation for poor quality—both in China and perhaps especially abroad. That's led some Africans to label these deals as “a new form of imperialism.” And then there is the inevitable corruption that seems to accompany these deals, which are almost always cut directly with African leaders, bypassing what civil society structures exist, including lawyers and local businesspeople. This way of doing business also leaves Chinese companies exposed. A Chinese manager named Robin told Kushner that the Chinese

talked with a Congolese official who promised to help them do it. They began courting him with kind words, and later, with gifts. “We gave him a car, a house, and a lot of furniture,” says Robin. “He had been to China to meet with our (company) president. He said ‘No problem, I promise you, you can buy a mine in Congo.’ But it was so complicated.” The mine never materialized.

Some Westerners might shake their heads, but the West pioneered not only colonialism in Africa, but the worst practices in dealing with newly independent countries. For thirty years after Congo's independence, Western countries supported Mobutu Sese

Seko, one of Africa's most corrupt dictators, supplying him with aid and weapons. Western companies have also sought to corner parts of Africa's resources, often turning a blind eye to abuses. China's novel approach is to package aid, soft loans, and private investment into a practical bundle, often sealed by a state visit.

This might be relatively new in Africa, but it's also how Western countries did business in China itself. Especially in the 1990s, when China's economic potential was becoming hard to ignore, Western heads of state would descend on Beijing with scores of corporate leaders in tow, pledging various goodies in exchange for access to the Chinese market. Perhaps the only difference was that for a brief period, when China needed the West more than the other way around, Western leaders secured token concessions on human rights, although this was usually little more than the release of a dissident or two. China makes no such pretenses in Africa, but then again, Western countries over the past decade have pretty much stopped talking about human rights when visiting China.

An even more interesting parallel might be between China's strategies in Africa and in its remote regions of Xinjiang and Tibet. There, China also follows a policy of heavy investment in infrastructure, and also reaps mixed benefits. Those regions have historically been marginal to the Chinese heartland, and ethnic Chinese have moved there in significant numbers only since the founding of the People's Republic. Both areas have been hit by violent protests against Chinese rule, and China has tried to pacify them with spectacular infrastructure projects, such as a railway to Lhasa. But unrest has increased, with violence even spilling over into Chinese cities.

Whether in Xinjiang or Africa, China seems befuddled that economics doesn't solve all problems, including its sometimes bad image. Several opinion surveys show that China is viewed more favorably in Africa than in many other parts of the world, but criticism of China is growing there. In part, this is because its policies often just entrench the corrupt oligarchies that have run the countries into the ground. In one of his best chapters, French takes us to Mali, where China has tried to revive a project, originally funded by France, of irrigating a vast tract of land. While the Chinese approach the project with gusto, they are confronted with NGOs skeptical of yet another foreign power coming in and snapping up land. Here and elsewhere, the Chinese seem unaware of European history and how it has made Africans extremely skeptical of foreign interlopers.

This is reinforced by yet more Han chauvinism—a problem that underpins many of China's troubles in Xinjiang and Tibet. In Liberia, French meets Chinese investors who think that African farmers don't have hoes, and arrogantly assume that Africans are inherently lazy and disorganized. French wonders if Chinese familiarity with their own history might not make them a bit more humble. Not too long ago, China was so poorly run that the same Communist Party ruling the country today presided over the worst famine in recorded history: "A snapshot taken then would have given a very different picture of the supposedly essential character of Chinese people, and it would have entirely missed the point."

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**D**espite these problems, Chinese history has valuable lessons to teach. Chinese leaders have been ruthless in playing foreign powers against one another, threatening to withhold market access, for example, if technology is not transferred. This has helped China to be more than an export-processing and resource-exporting center: the country is starting to innovate and challenge the West on a host of fronts. For Africa to do the same, it will need leaders who are equally adept at putting

their national interests first, even if they occasionally line their pockets.

French sees Africa at a crossroads. The combination of demographics, education, and communication is giving some African countries a chance to move up the ladder, just like East Asian countries did after World War II and as China did a generation later. African countries have a youthful population, which means a productive workforce, and by the end of the century the continent could have 3.5 billion people, more than China and India combined. But French thinks that only the best-governed African countries—probably the emerging democracies, such as Ghana—will be able to take advantage of these changes. In other countries, a greedy elite will squander resources.

In Africans' dealings with China, they face a hard choice. They can accept the football stadiums and broad boulevards that many of their own politicians would like to build—the prestige projects that do little other than satisfy a leader's vanity. Or they can insist on high-quality roads, schools, and hospitals, and make sure they get the best price for their resources. If they do, they can use new Chinese suitors to their advantage, much like China has done with the West. In French's words:

Mid-century will stand out as a sort of twin horizon for Africa, when population growth peaks and when known oil and mineral reserves are exhausted in many countries.... For the less fortunate, though, China and its voracious appetites will merely hasten an already foreseeable demise. ■

1. See, for example, "[Zambia: Workers Detail Abuse in Chinese-Owned Mines](#)," Human Rights Watch, November 3, 2011, as well as "[China: Quashing Criticism at Home and Abroad](#)," Human Rights Watch, May 27, 2014. ↗
2. This history is admirably expounded by Deborah Brautigam in *The Dragon's Gift: The Real Story of China in Africa* (Oxford University Press, 2009). ↗
3. See, for example, Jacques Enaudeau, "[In Search of the African Middle Class](#)," *The Guardian*, May 3, 2013. ↗

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