

China in Africa: Culturally Ethical?

Introduction

In 2009, a government population survey estimated that the Chinese population in Africa was between 580,000 to 820,000 people. Today, that number has risen to over one million (Park, “Living in Between”). What accounts for this sudden influx of Chinese migrants? Even though China and Africa have always had close ties, in the last decade China has taken an active role in the development of African infrastructure. On the surface the investments of Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in African infrastructure projects seems mutually beneficial, but foreign powers such as the United States have questioned China’s true motives for investing in Africa. While the arguments for or against the ethics of China’s involvement are mostly economic or political in nature, there is also a cultural aspect that mostly deals with the cultural clash and large-scale migration of Chinese people that has resulted from China’s decision to outsource their own labor to Africa. From a cultural standpoint, China’s involvement is not technically unethical even though the increasing Chinese population has perpetuated a growing African fear of a reemergence of colonialism through China.

Chinese Perspective

From a Chinese perspective, bringing in their own labor instead of hiring local workers is not an issue of bias, but of practicality. One reason that Chinese SOEs opt to outsource Chinese laborers to work on infrastructure projects is the language barrier between local workers and project managers, who are typically ethnic Chinese and speak only English and Chinese (Corkin). One Angolan newspaper reported a case in which a site worker reported a bad work environment due to the fact that his Chinese overseer did not speak Portuguese, one the most prominent spoken languages in Africa. Because site workers are not

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usually provided with a translator, they often misinterpret their instructions which in turn leads to frequent conflicts between workers and managers (Meyer). However, even in English-speaking regions of Africa, the language barrier remains a significant issue as many Chinese find it difficult to communicate as effectively in English. “It remains a challenge for them to express themselves correctly in English,” said Bridgette Liu, senior manager of a project in Angola. “It’s a natural inclination to communicate in Mandarin and do business with other Chinese,” (Liu).

Furthermore, there is a cultural difference in terms of work ethic. In China, laborers are required to complete an extensive training program, while African laborers do not undergo such intensive training. These programs enroll over 11 million students each year and aim to teach both discipline and additional skills such as coordination and surveillance (“Vocational Education”). As a result of this particular type of training, Chinese laborers are multi-skilled and can handle all manners of tasks that would usually require several workers of varying skill-levels (Meyer). Therefore, such training also greatly reduces the number of laborers needed on project sites as well as labor costs since companies do not have to implement additional training and can save both the time and resources needed to do so. Furthermore, on project sites that hire local labor, absenteeism rates were reported to be “rarely less than 20%” while the rate of absenteeism for Chinese laborers is significantly lower at almost 0% (Corkin).

It then follows that the outsourcing of Chinese laborers to Africa is not due to bias; rather, Chinese companies see it as much more efficient to hire laborers with whom communicating will not prove an issue, and who are known to possess better work ethics as a result of cultural expectations.

Local Perspective

From a local African perspective, even though the increased Chinese presence as a result of outsourcing laborers has led to several opinions, the prevailing one is that the Chinese are attempting to colonize Africa as other Western countries did in the 1900s. Both China and Africa have a shared history of being colonized by the West, which has led to strong anti-colonial sentiment in both countries but particularly in Africa (Meyer). The sudden spike in the Chinese population in Africa has given ground to the fear that their presence is indicative of a gradual Chinese takeover in Africa, and in some areas this fear of colonization is so pervasive that it has even led to attacks on Chinese communities such as the situations in the Congo in 2009 (Shinn). Even Michael Sata, the president of Zambia, has explicitly expressed his concerns about Chinese motives, saying that “the Chinese are the most unpopular people in the country” and “the Chinaman is coming just to invade and exploit Africa” (French).

There are some who believe that the increased Chinese population in Africa is beneficial because of the increased globalization that results from the merging of Chinese and African cultures. Many Chinese choose to expatriate themselves to Africa as laborers as a sort of stepping stone to the country – even after their contracts have expired, many Chinese establish themselves in Africa as small business owners and entrepreneurs, bringing new products and ideas into Africa that locals would not have access to otherwise (Park, “Africans Have Mixed Perceptions”). In countries such as Zimbabwe and South Africa, the attitude towards Chinese migrants is that of appreciation rather than resentment (Park, “Living in Between”). However, even in these nations, the fear of colonization is eminent. For example, traders and local businesses in these nations often feel threatened and undermined, and other locals see the influx of Chinese products and ideas as creating a cultural imbalance (Manji).

While Chinese involvement in Africa has indirectly perpetuated this fear culture, it can be seen that the fear of colonization has more to do with Africa’s history than China’s

actions in Africa. Locals have acknowledged the benefits of the increased Chinese presence, from which it can be concluded that China's level of involvement can be considered culturally acceptable and therefore ethical. While the issue of the fear culture remains, China cannot be totally faulted for its emergence, though perhaps in the future Chinese companies should be more aware and mindful of it when considering courses of action in Africa.

Solution

The largest cultural issue for the Chinese in Africa is the fear culture, and in order to rectify the conflicts this causes, the Chinese should focus on courses of action that would clarify their motives for their involvement. Because one reason locals believe that Chinese are biased and attempting to overtake them is the lack of local laborers on infrastructure development projects, implementing solutions that would allow local workers more opportunities would prove quite effective. One possible solution could be requiring Chinese companies to provide translators on work sites. This would decrease the number of language-related work conflicts and remove language as an important factor in hiring new laborers. While this would also increase job opportunities for multi-lingual locals, it would increase labor costs for Chinese SOEs and therefore is not cost-effective. Furthermore, it is not the most effective solution with regards to mitigating the fear culture since it is not the only factor that perpetuates local perceptions of bias against Africans. Thus, solutions implemented in the future should be widely-encompassing and benefit both Chinese companies and local Africans in order for the ethical nature of China's involvement to be seen clearly by both local and international parties.

(1,199 words)

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Team Reflection

Research and Personal Perspective

I was really excited to base my project on the topic of ethical foreign policies. My previous experiences in activities such as Model United Nations have encouraged me to go through a similar process of deconstructing public information on foreign policies and countries' past actions in order to reconstruct opinions on new situations, and I thought that this would really prove advantageous in this project. While my background in MUN provided an interesting pretext for the project I found that the skills I developed from it were quite different from what was needed to complete the project. The most notable difference was that the report required a certain level of objectivity while the reconstruction required for MUN is much more biased.

Through this project, I've developed a new understanding of international relations but especially of the relationship between China and Africa. In the past I've only ever really considered the economic or political aspects of the topic, but for this individual report I focused on the cultural lens instead. I was initially a little upset that this was the lens my group assigned me because I felt that this was the most difficult lens to find information on and seem unbiased with, because the research that's required for it is really based more on opinion rather than facts and data which is what I've been used to in the past. In the end, however, I'm glad that I got to focus on a more difficult aspect because I was able to develop my deconstruction and reconstruction skills more since I had to take more information from each source as well as incorporate more of my own personal interpretation of this information to support my point, since I sometimes came across information that I found a bit confusing. Since we also had to come up with a solution, we had to focus not only on what was happening, but why, and I feel like this was an interesting new skill that we had to develop through this project even though I felt like I wouldn't be able to come up with a feasible

solution at first. I think that this project also allowed me to explore the far-reaching consequences of countries' actions, especially when several parties are involved. With a situation like China's involvement in Africa's infrastructure development, it would be expected that the main consequences would be political and economic in nature, but this project helped me see that there are serious implications for culture as well. I feel like my thinking has also changed in that I now have a bit of a tighter grasp on China and Africa's foreign policies, which would prove helpful in the future due to the prominence of both regions with regards to the rest of the world.

Group Dynamics

I can honestly say that I think the group I worked with for this project is one of the best groups I've ever worked with. In the past I've often been almost forced into the role of group leader, which entails having to be really strict with my group members about deadlines and doing their work properly, and this often makes me seem bossy and controlling. This time, however, I feel like I got to take a break from that. We were all equals in the group – not one of us stood out as a leader because we all made sure to pull our own weight in the group. It was helpful that we all had quite similar work habits and methods of research, because it meant that we were able to collaborate fairly equally and there were no conflicts that arose from an unequal work distribution.

At first we all had some concerns because we were unsure if our preexisting friendship would get in the way of our group. While it sometimes proved distracting because we would want to talk to each other about different things when we were meant to be working, in the end we were always able to meet the deadlines and goals that we set for ourselves and I think our friendship actually worked to our advantage. We were very honest with each other about how we were feeling about the project, which meant that we were able to avoid any drama in our group so we knew we didn't have to worry about underlying

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tensions or fears getting in the way of our productivity. Our friendship also made communicating really simple because we were already used to talking with each other often and checking in, and we already knew each other's schedules so collaborating was easy to arrange.

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