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# Journal of Current Chinese Affairs

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## Understanding Chinese–African Interactions in Africa

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# Sino-African Encounters in Ghana and Nigeria: From Conflict to Conviviality and Mutual Benefit

Ben LAMPERT and Giles MOHAN

**Abstract:** China's renewed engagement with Africa is often framed as a form of imperialism, with the growing number of Chinese migrants on the continent seen as an exploitative presence. Such claims have generally been based on little evidence, and where more detailed empirical studies have emerged, they tend to emphasise the tensions and conflicts that have arisen. Our research on Chinese migrants in Ghana and Nigeria suggests that while there are concerns about Chinese competition in the informal retail sector and the treatment of local labour in Chinese enterprises, narratives of apparent tension and conflict are often much more nuanced than is generally recognised. Furthermore, more convivial and cooperative relations have also emerged and these have facilitated important opportunities for Africans to benefit from the Chinese presence. However, while the presence of Chinese migrants in African socio-economic life can be more integrated and mutually beneficial than is often assumed, the ability of African actors to benefit from this presence is highly uneven, placing the politics of class at the centre of any understanding of Sino-African encounters.

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**Keywords:** China in Africa, Chinese migrants in Africa, migration and development, conviviality, globalisation

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## Moving beyond Ethnicity in Understanding Everyday Sino-African Encounters

The migration and development literature largely assumes a “South”-to-“North” trajectory, but much migration is “South–South” (Hujo and Piper 2007; Ratha and Shaw 2007), even if these geographical categories are problematic (Bakewell 2009). The Chinese are part of a small but significant migration flow to Africa. However, we lack fine-grained analysis of how these migrants and the African societies they reside in interact, and how this affects development. New studies on Chinese migrants and their relationships with Africans, as well as on African migrants in China, are emerging (e.g. Bodomo 2010; Giese and Thiel 2012; Haugen 2012) which confirm a level of cultural dissonance that produces tensions, but not ones that necessarily result in conflict. This paper<sup>1</sup> makes similar observations, though our analysis takes a political economy perspective that focuses on the intersections between globalisation and class rather than culture *per se*. We are not discounting cultural identity but feel it is overdetermined in the accounts of “China” in “Africa”. By focusing on the globalisation of China and Africa, processes of capital accumulation, and the embedded nature of local politics, we get a more mixed picture of why and how Chinese and Africans engage. Note that these categories are pluralised since we argue that different nationally based classes strategically align at certain moments, which makes for quite convivial social relations as opposed to only the antagonistic, culturally determined ones. Indeed, we would argue that racial and cultural othering have come to stand in for class conflict, which has implications for the politics of China in Africa and the possibilities for mutual development.

This paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork with Chinese migrants in Ghana and Nigeria, as well as with Ghanaians and Nigerians connected to or affected by their presence. The research was conducted between July 2010 and September 2011 and involved participant observation, a local attitude survey and semi-structured interviews with 102 Chinese migrants and 61 Ghanaians and Nigerians.

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While informed by our wider data set, this paper draws principally on participant observation and interviews with Ghanaian and Nigerian respondents and explores their perspectives on, and relations with, Chinese migrants. All respondents and associated companies have been anonymised, and where names have been used, these are pseudonyms.

The paper unfolds as follows. We frame the analysis using Castles' (2009, 2010) social transformation framework, which situates global migration as a "normal" part of development, although Castles implicitly defines such migration flows as South-to-North rather than South-to-South. The framework is used to set up two contrasting trends, which we analyse using our data on Chinese migrants in Ghana and Nigeria. The first trend is the development of tension and conflict around two issues: the activities of Chinese traders, and the treatment of local workers in Chinese enterprises. The second trend is the apparent opposite: the development of convivial social relations between Chinese migrants and some Africans. Here, we highlight how these convivial encounters are a channel through which African actors can leverage significant benefits from the Chinese presence. However, we emphasise that these encounters are shaped by class dynamics, meaning that the ability of African actors to derive benefits from them is highly uneven.

## Theoretical Framework

Drawing on the recent work of Castles, our intention is to develop a political economy of social relations that is attentive to local agency. Existing studies of China–Africa relations tend to focus on state-based elites and all but ignore African agency (see Mohan and Lampert 2013). Where more "everyday", micro-level relations are considered, the Chinese presence in Africa is often presented as exploitative with an emphasis on labour abuses, tensions and the perception of mutual threat between Chinese and Africans (e.g. Human Rights Watch 2011; McNamee et al. 2012). Giese and Thiel (2012) examine cross-cultural employment relations in the particular context of Chinese trading companies in Accra, necessarily focusing on the Chinese employer–African employee relationship, which has a particular class dynamic built into it. They argue that expectations on both sides are not always met, causing tensions to arise, though these are rarely

explosive. Similar empirical arguments about the lack of trust appear in Haugen and Carling (2005) (see also Hsu 2007; Dobler 2008). What these studies show is that despite a framing of protagonists in national and cultural terms, it is the interplay of class and other identities that shapes the tensions. As such, they caution us against static readings of intercultural relations and urge us to focus on the intersection of multiple class positions and embodied axes of identity.

To unpack these linkages between globalisation, class and identity, Lee (2009) frames the tensions between Chinese and Africans in terms of political economy. Her perspective centres on neoliberalism and the attendant casualisation of labour and subordination of trade unions rather than on the fundamental differences in the worldviews of “the Chinese” or “Africans”. We concur that political economy is vital and that we should avoid overly culturalist explanations (see Meagher 2012; Dirlík 1997). Hints of this interplay between class and an Orientalist cultural gaze can be found in Haugen and Carling (2005), where respondents talk about “yellow” and “black” people sharing a position of doing “dirty work”, out of which a certain affinity arises. There are complex class, geopolitical and racial dynamics at play in these expressions of affinity (Jacques 2009).

## Towards an Integrative Framework

In seeking to analyse Chinese migrants in Africa in relational and developmental terms, we use Castles’ (2009, 2010) analysis of migration as social transformation. The attractiveness of this framework is that it breaks from the methodological nationalism that pervades much of the work on migration, and in contrast to the “sedentarist bias” it treats migration as normal and constitutive of social change rather than as an aberration which needs to be “managed” for “proper” development to take place. Castles’ understanding of social transformation is taken from Polanyi, who argued that economic relations are embedded in society and that during the transition to capitalism economic relations become disembedded from social relations, which requires purposive action to contain these contradictions (see Hart 2001).

Under neoliberal globalisation, the deepening of capitalist relations intensifies the processes of transformation across space, one of which – according to Castles – is “South”-to-“North” migration. For African societies, globalisation is a long-standing reality and, as Fer-

guson (2006) argues, has re-emphasised Africa's position in the global economy as a supplier of raw materials. It is also a process that entrenches the power of elites who can control access to these resources (see Carmody 2011). This broad framing of global restructuring is important but misses two crucial elements: First, the rise of China is now a major part of the globalisation story (Henderson 2008), which adds new actors to the African resource-access landscape without necessarily changing the terms on which this occurs (Tull 2006). The result is that migration flows are not simply South-to-North, but South-to-South (see Mohan 2013). Second, while globalisation is seen to concern large transnational corporations, interstate negotiations and multilateral institutions, it also affects small firms and individual migrants who may operate outside of any obvious state-based agendas (see Gu 2009; Alden 2007). Hence, there are different modes and scales over which globalisation occurs. This is echoed in Castles' comment that Polanyian approaches to transformation are essentially top-down and "fail to analyse the local effects of global economic and political forces" (Castles 2009: 16). That said, these private Chinese firms are capitalist, so we have to acknowledge the accumulation imperative in any relationship these firms have with African actors.

From here, Castles (2010) argues for a multi-scaled analysis that connects examinations at global, national and local levels (see also Mung 2008). Such a comprehensive analysis is sensitive not only to historical conditioning but also to the local context, the latter including political institutions and human agency. In our analysis of Chinese migrants in West Africa, we examine both agency and resistance (see Mohan and Lampert 2013), which helps us understand the tensions and conviviality we see. The value of such a global-local focus helps us move beyond fixed notions of identity and to explore the ways in which interaction and mixing occur. However, while the idea of convivial social relations has been posited by Gilroy (2004) as a real and useful antidote to a postcolonial "melancholia" in the UK, it remains an empirically lifeless concept (Bonnett 2010). Here we use the anthropological account of Overing and Passes (2000), which sees conviviality as the "affective side" of sociality. Regarding work, this affective side pertains to

the congenial, convivial relations of work [that] are essential to a sociality that allows for very little coercive force, and no discord, with respect to the matter of work (Overing and Passes 2000: 16).

However, Overing and Passes are not peddling some pristine utopia – convivial sociality carries within it the threat of destruction of social unity. Methodologically, this points us to an “ethnography of the ordinary” (Overing and Passes 2000: 8).

Despite this call for examining the non-coercive side of social relations, our earlier observations suggested that in order to deepen our understanding of both tensions and convivial relations we need to examine class as a process. In this analysis, we break away from fixed and homogenising understandings of classes and tease out the interplay of structured economic relationships with other axes of social identity (Gibson-Graham 2006: 11). We are distancing ourselves from the Weberian-inspired literature on Chinese firms that tends to posit cultural closure and to essentialise “groups” (Meagher 2012; Greenhalgh 1994). These Weberian accounts emphasise closed communities and “ethnic” economies built around *guanxi* (关系). However, Meagher (2012) argues that when Chinese networks “touch ground” in Africa they become more like African networks, where forms of semi-legal brokerage by intermediaries enable these enterprises to operate. Here she uses Brautigam’s (2003) work on “flying geese industrialisation”, whereby the Chinese presence can kick-start local economic development. By contrast, when Meagher uses Hart’s (1996) work on South Africa and Taiwan, we get a different reading and an analysis closer to Lee’s (2009) political economy of casualisation and undercutting, which is anything but developmental. This points to a contextual understanding of the relationship between class, cultural capital and ethnicity (Ellis 2011) and their connection to development impacts.

## Tension and Conflict I: Chinese Traders vs. African Traders and Manufacturers

It has been well documented that the growing Chinese presence in Africa has generated considerable public debate and even protest. As in a number of other African countries (see, for example, Dittgen 2010; Dobler 2008; McNamee et al. 2012; Scheld 2010), one of the most contentious issues related to the Chinese presence in Ghana and

Nigeria has been the arrival since the early 2000s of significant numbers of Chinese traders and their importation of large quantities of “cheap” Chinese consumer goods. This is often seen to present a direct challenge to locals operating in the informal retail sector and to undermine local manufacturing. In Ghana, some of the most prominent agitation has been led by the Ghana Union of Traders Association (GUTA) and has centred on the main markets of central Accra.

Shops run by Chinese traders started to become a notable feature of central Accra in the early 2000s, especially in the vicinity of a large retail complex in Rawlings Park, which was formally re-named the “Ghana Chinese Commodities Wholesale Town” around 2004 and is popularly known as “China Town”, even though only a few Chinese shops remain in the complex. By late 2005, GUTA began expressing its dissatisfaction with the “unrestrained invasion” of “foreigners” into the retail sector and suggested that a “massive demonstration” would be held in Accra if the government failed to enforce the 1994 Ghana Investment Promotion Centre (GIPC) Act (Takyi-Boadu 2005). This legislation explicitly reserves for Ghanaians the business of retailing in public markets and stipulates that any form of foreign-owned trading enterprise must make a minimum investment of 300,000 USD and employ at least ten local staff. Although the government was aware of the growing disquiet and had already undertaken to review the legislation (GNA 2005), its response failed to satisfy GUTA. In late 2007, the association organised a day of action involving the closure of shops and a march which culminated in a mass rally in Opera Square, bringing the capital’s commercial heart to a standstill (GNA 2007a, 2007b; Klutse and Ennin 2007). The government entered into discussions with GUTA and in mid-2009 agreed to revise the GIPC Act and form a multi-agency task force to more effectively enforce the legislation (Nonor 2009).

However, impact of the task force was limited. While the manager of the “China Town” complex reports that increasing attention from immigration and revenue officials played a role in encouraging most of the Chinese shops to leave the complex, many simply relocated to nearby streets where, dispersed among African businesses, they apparently felt less prone to targeting by the authorities (Anonymous 1 2011). Indeed, by 2011, some of the side roads and smaller complexes near “China Town” were almost completely dominated by Chinese shops, many selling shoes with others specialising in lug-

gage, household furnishings, electrical fittings, plumbing equipment and fishing nets.

GUTA remains highly agitated, bemoaning that while the Chinese shops claim to engage only in wholesale business, they continue to retail despite being unlikely to have met the legal requirements of having made an initial investment of 300,000 USD and employing a minimum of ten local workers (Anonymous 2 2011). Compounding this, GUTA argues, Chinese traders gain unfair advantages through a range of underhand practices such as selling cheaper “imitation” goods, underreporting imports and sales to reduce tariffs and taxes, avoiding making social security payments for the local staff they employ, and using their greater access to credit in order to inflate shop rents and force locals out of business. The GIPC task force has failed to rectify the situation, GUTA complains, because there is a “tendency” for officials to take payments from the Chinese shops in return for not enforcing the regulations (Anonymous 2 2011). While the current Minister for Trade and Industry has publicly sympathised with GUTA’s concerns (GNA 2010), officials of the association warn that if decisive action is not taken soon, they may no longer be able to contain the frustration of their members. “If nothing is done about it”, the GUTA General Secretary contends, “[...] every human endurance has its limit, so when it reaches the peak, definitely there will be eruption”. Indeed, he goes on to report that a branch of GUTA recently brought a resolution threatening direct action against Chinese traders. “If nothing is done about it”, the branch apparently determined, “perhaps we will come and flush them out ourselves”.

In Nigeria, strong resistance against the activities of Chinese traders has also been excited by the emergence of a prominent “China Town” shopping complex. Nigeria’s first “China Town” had originally been established in 1999 in the upmarket Lagos district of Ikoyi but in 2002 it began the process of relocating to a larger site, in Ojota (Anonymous 3 2010). By this time, “China Town” had become a target for prominent Nigerian manufacturers and the Manufacturers Association of Nigeria (MAN), which argued that the complex was a channel for the influx of cheap and often substandard Chinese consumer goods that was undermining local producers, particularly in the textile industry (Anonymous 3 2010; Anonymous 4 2011; see also Akinrinade and Ogen 2008; Ogidan 2004). Responding to these calls from the manufacturing lobby, the federal government added a new

raft of goods, including textiles, to its import prohibition list, and in late 2005, just nine months after the new “China Town” was officially commissioned, officers of the Nigeria Customs Service (NCS) raided the complex, seized contraband goods and sealed the premises (Obasola 2006). “The activities of foreigners should not be allowed to destroy the industrial base of this country”, declared the head of the NCS (quoted in Mbachu 2006: 81). MAN promptly commended the government for taking action and called for those involved in selling prohibited goods to be prosecuted and for “China Town” to be closed permanently (*Daily Independent* 2006; Okere 2006).

While no prosecutions appear to have been made and the complex was allowed to reopen three months later (Obasola 2006), the raid and temporary closure severely disrupted “China Town”, with most of the Chinese traders losing large amounts of stock and many seeking alternative opportunities elsewhere in Nigeria and beyond (Anonymous 3 2010). Those who remained in the Lagos “China Town” and continued to import contraband goods, particularly textiles, found it increasingly expensive to “settle” officials and even then often had their shipments confiscated. Business never recovered to the previous levels, and at the time of research almost half of the complex’s shops were unoccupied. For its part, MAN certainly appears to be less concerned about the specific case of “China Town” and more inclined to focus its efforts on the wider problem of regulating the importation of counterfeit and substandard Chinese goods (Anonymous 4 2011). The activities of Chinese traders have nonetheless continued to be a cause of local agitation, particularly in Kano’s textile market. Here, complaints about a growing Chinese presence in direct retailing recently prompted the arrest of 45 Chinese traders by the Nigeria Immigration Service (NIS), the local NIS chief promising that they would be deported and declaring that “economic scavengers” would not be allowed in Nigeria (BBC 2012).

## Tension and Conflict II: Chinese Bosses vs. African Workers

Alongside the activities of Chinese migrant traders, a second key issue in debates about the growing Chinese presence in Africa has been the employment of locals in Chinese enterprises. Much has been made of the apparent tendency of Chinese companies in Africa to import

most of their labour from China and thereby create relatively few opportunities for local employment (see, for example, Bergesen 2008). However, while there have been some Chinese state-backed projects in Ghana and Nigeria where a large proportion of the labour has been Chinese, this has not emerged as the major area of concern around employment. Indeed, with Chinese enterprises in the two countries often employing largely African workforces, the treatment of local workers has become the overriding issue.

As has been highlighted elsewhere in Africa (see, for example, Baah and Jauch 2009; Brooks 2010; Lee 2009), there are widespread complaints about low pay and poor conditions in Chinese companies and a growing sense in some quarters that “the Chinese” are particularly bad employers. GUTA certainly echoes such accusations in its case against Chinese traders operating in Accra’s markets. An official of the association argues,

they go in for cheap labour, people who do not even know let alone understand their rights, then they will take them as temporary [workers], underpay them, then they discard them after some time and then recruit another (Anonymous 2 2011).

A Ghanaian who has for several years helped some of these Chinese traders with their accounts and tax returns, and who appears to have no particular grudge against them, concurs, describing the wages they pay their local shop staff as “very woeful” (Anonymous 5 2011). “They don’t pay much at all”, he contends,

aside that, he will not pay any social security, he will just not pay anything for you. They can also just decide to just let you go anytime he feels he doesn’t want your services (Anonymous 5 2011).

Having experienced such conditions, a local worker in a Chinese shop in Accra complained that his salary of around 80 GHS a month barely covers his basic living expenses (Anonymous 6 2011). He contends that his employers meet their legal obligation to pay his social security contributions only because he asked them to do so, and he is particularly angry that they deduct his pay when he is unable to attend work due to illness. For him, such treatment is symptomatic of a general lack of basic respect and compassion on the part of Chinese bosses: “They don’t care about black [people]”, he laments bitterly, “they don’t care about you the worker, he doesn’t even respect you”. This illustrates not only how the treatment of local workers in Chi-

nese enterprises can generate anger and resentment but also how this can be expressed in racialised ways, instigating a process of othering through which distinct and potentially divisive identity boundaries are constructed (cf. Giese and Thiel 2012). As the Ghanaian worker continues,

I have worked with these people, I know how they are [...]. So as for me I look at them and laugh. I say, “You people, you are very bad people.” [...] These Chinese people, [...], I don’t like them (Anonymous 6 2011).

And as in the case of GUTA’s agitation against Chinese traders, there is an implicit threat of violence contained only by the self-ascribed restraint of Ghanaians: “You can see a Chinese man with the money, you can easily beat him and take the money, but we don’t do that.”

In Nigeria, controversy about labour conditions in Chinese enterprises has been generated in the manufacturing sector, where a number of long-established Hong Kong Chinese companies have not only become key players but also developed a reputation for poor industrial relations (Mthembu-Salter 2009; Obiorah 2007; Oyeranti, Babatunde, and Ogunkola 2011; Taylor 2007; Utomi 2008). The issue of low pay is again prominent, a MAN official claiming, “In fact, they enslave workers, their pay is very, very poor” (Anonymous 4 2011). This has led to incidents of industrial unrest, and this respondent recalls that workers at one well-known Hong Kong Chinese factory in Lagos once became so aggrieved at their low pay that they demonstrated and “wanted to burn the whole place”. It is also reported that this company has upset its workers and the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) for apparently employing many on a casual basis, even after years of service in some cases (Babalola and Lawal 2002; Ibhareneafe 2002; Oyeranti, Babatunde, and Ogunkola 2011).

Such tensions around pay and casualisation have been compounded by the reported anti-union practices of some Chinese manufacturing companies in Nigeria. For example, when the National Union of Chemical, Footwear, Rubber, Leather and Non-Metallic Products Employees (NUCFRLNMPE) called for improvements in workers’ conditions at a factory in Kano belonging to one of the two largest Hong Kong Chinese industrial conglomerates based in Nigeria, the company reportedly responded by intimidating union members and temporarily shutting down the factory (Ahiuma-Young 2009; Atomre et al. 2009; *The Nation* 2008). A senior NUCFRLNMPE

official in Kano laments that none of the company's factories in the city currently has a branch of the union and that any worker who attempts to form one is promptly sacked (Anonymous 7 2011). Consequently, he claims that the company continues to coerce excessive hours from its workers while paying salaries that can be less than half the negotiated industry-wide minimum monthly wage of 13,400 NGN. "This is a document, it's a law", he insists, "[...] but the Chinese man will tell you, 'This law, you must review it.'" He complains,

You can start negotiation from morning to night with the Chinese man, you will never achieve one single thing. [...] The difficult employer is the Chinese man.

## Destabilising the Divide: Nuancing Accounts of Tension and Conflict in Sino-African Encounters

The activities of Chinese traders and the treatment of local workers in Chinese enterprises have clearly caused significant tensions and produced some negative racialised generalisations about, and even implicit threats of violence against, "the Chinese". However, we found that this is far from the complete picture – responses to the expanded Chinese presence in Ghana and Nigeria are more complex than this. Even those who feel they have been negatively affected often emphasise that the Chinese presence is not the sole cause of their problems and do not necessarily engage in specifically "anti-Chinese" agitation. In many cases, other foreign actors or even fellow locals are seen to be equally or even more responsible, and general issues of local governance and regulation are consistently highlighted as the most pressing concerns. Indeed, rather than Chinese migrants or foreigners *per se*, it is overwhelmingly the state that is the target of resentment (see also Bourdarias 2010). Furthermore, negative reactions to the Chinese presence are often qualified and even countered by those who directly benefit from Chinese activities or believe these activities have positive social and economic outcomes.

These more complex responses can be seen in relation to the activities of Chinese traders and the treatment of local workers in Chinese enterprises. GUTA's agitation against Chinese traders in central Accra and beyond is part of a wider agitation against foreign traders in general. At GUTA's 2007 protest rally against "the invasion of the retail trade by foreigners", it was not only Chinese traders who were

pinpointed but also traders from India, Nigeria and Turkey (GNA 2007a). And while Chinese traders are widely considered to be prominent among these groups and have therefore attracted particular attention, it is Nigerian traders that are often seen to be the greatest cause for concern. Nigerian shops certainly appear to have been particularly affected by GIPC clampdowns on foreign traders, prompting vocal complaints from Nigerian traders, politicians and officials (see, for example, Ameyaw 2007; Ezugwu 2012). Indeed, the situation appears to have become even more politicised than the issue of Chinese traders, with reports of GUTA members directly harassing Nigerian traders, and reprisals against Ghanaian traders in Nigeria also reported (Ameyaw 2007). As one Ghanaian businessman commented, it is an issue that has been “threatening the relationship between Ghana and Nigeria” (Anonymous 8 2011).

Furthermore, it is widely recognised even among those who have expressed concern about the influx of “cheap” Chinese products that it is often local rather than Chinese traders who are primarily responsible (see also Axelsson 2012; Axelsson and Sylvanus 2010; Haugen 2011; Marfaing and Thiel 2011). For example, the CEO of one of Ghana’s leading indigenous industries has, in his own words, “been making a lot of noise” about cheap, low-quality imports from China undermining his business, but asserts:

China is actually not exporting into Ghana *per se*. Yeah, they make it available, [but] it’s Ghanaians and Nigerians that go to China to order what they want to buy. They go, they see the dregs, they see the trash, they see the Rolls Royces and what do they buy? Trash. That’s what’s coming here, it’s not the Chinese fault. [...W]hat the Ghanaian guys are doing, they are bringing these things in regardless of quality because they look at the money [i.e. cost]. [...S]o I don’t blame the Chinese [...], I blame the guys who go get that kind of stuff. [...] So it’s difficult to be anti-Chinese (Anonymous 9 2011).

Similarly, while MAN has led agitation against the “China Town” in Lagos, one of its officials is clear that it is local traders who are the main culprits in the importation of low-quality Chinese goods. He argues:

All these products are being based by specification, it’s what the importers went there to request that they are giving to them. [...B]ecause you see the poverty level has made our importers [...]

look at what can be done at least to make people live average because sometimes when you bring in standard products with high price, the sales will be very poor [...], [so] then you will try to bring down the cost (Anonymous 4 2011).

This realisation means that MAN is focusing its attention on local traders, joining with government in “campaigning to change the orientation of Nigerians who go [to China] to make specification for lower-quality products” (Anonymous 4 2011).

What is more, some local actors see the expanded presence of Chinese traders as having positive impacts and are prepared to defend their activities to varying degrees. There is considerable sympathy for the argument that the increased entry of Chinese traders has served to lower the price local consumers have to pay for Chinese goods, and that this has a wide-reaching social benefit (see also Carling and Haugen 2008). For example, while a member of staff at the Kano Chamber of Commerce would prefer Chinese entrepreneurs to invest in the Nigerian textile industry, she nonetheless contends:

Even in the textile importation of clothes, I don't see much wrong because they have been able to clothe almost everybody, anybody can afford to get to them according to his capacity. We've had Vlisco brand from pre-independence up to now, not everyone can afford it. But the Chinese have come in and within a few years they've managed to clothe everybody (Anonymous 10 2011).

A Ghanaian member of the Ghana–China Friendship Association, who is concerned more with promoting Ghanaian products in China than with defending the Chinese in Ghana, agrees that Chinese traders have benefitted local consumers by reducing the cost of Chinese goods. He argues that those making “big noise about the Chinese taking over the economy” are Ghanaian importers who previously enjoyed excessive profits on Chinese goods (Anonymous 11 2011). “They are being edged out of the business because they short-changed us”, he contends, “So the Chinese themselves have come to give us the proper prices, so that is why they are not happy.” Notably, the Ghana Central Shopkeepers Association, which is allied with GUTA, complains that local distributors, in the form of what are popularly known as “market women”, prefer to buy from Chinese traders and have even challenged GUTA's campaign against the Chinese presence in the market (Anonymous 2 2011).

Support from local distributors and consumers also seems to have played a role in the survival of the “China Town” in Lagos. For example, a Nigerian who has been closely involved with the management of the complex reports that it had become a popular source of goods for “market women” from across Lagos and beyond and that when it was closed down by the Nigeria Customs Service in 2005, the city’s influential market women’s association called on the governor of Lagos State to see to its reopening (Anonymous 12 2010). Such efforts clearly prevailed and the complex was soon reopened, albeit with the loss of much of its vibrancy.

In addition to the support for Chinese traders from consumers and local distributors, government officials and some elements of the organised private sector often have a relatively relaxed attitude towards the Chinese trading presence. This derives primarily from the sentiment that in a globalised age, international flows of goods, people and investment are inevitable and, if managed properly, ultimately desirable. For example, an official in Ghana’s Ministry of Trade and Industry explained, “The rise of China is a reality and we have to accept it. The Chinese will come whether we like it or not” (Anonymous 13 2011). The key is, he argued, to be proactive and shape the nature of the “cooperation”. This would, he claimed, “remove some of the trivial problems that have come to be associated with the Chinese, like people saying they are doing retail trade”. Tellingly, he went on to argue that “we live in a global world and there are no borders anymore” and pointed out that “there are lots of Ghanaians in China now”. The implication appeared to be that Ghanaians should recognise such global realities and be more accepting of the Chinese trading presence, which he saw as an inevitable part of a wider set of relations that he, and the Ghanaian government as a whole, are working to build with China.

Similarly, while a senior official at the Kano Chamber of Commerce believes that the entry of Chinese traders should be subject to some government regulation, he emphasises that such flows are inherent to the modern world and ultimately produce positive outcomes. In making this argument, he appeals to a sense of global citizenship as well as the economic benefits of international investment:

In a globalised environment, [to] which we are all claiming to belong, it is very, very difficult to say the Chinese should pack off and go. Because the Chinese are in India, they are in America, they

are in other Western European countries. [...] So definitely, Chinese people, you cannot just take them as intruders, so to say, or people that are not welcome. [...] In economics there is nothing like stopping A, B, C, D from participating in a business. No! We are all universal citizens. [...] If you are bringing money from any country to come and invest in Nigeria, it is in the interest of the Nigerian economy. So if the Chinese people are bringing their money to invest in Nigeria, it is very, very good (Anonymous 10 2011).

Chinese entrepreneurial investment is especially welcomed in the manufacturing sector, as this is seen to have the potential to make a significant contribution to local development. Stressing Kano's long history of being a "cosmopolitan city" that welcomes "all people to come and do business", a senior official at the Kano State Ministry of Commerce, Industry, Cooperatives and Tourism explained that the state government "see[s] the recent influx of the Chinese as an opportunity, not a threat" and hopes that Chinese traders will, after familiarising themselves with the local market, "want to turn to manufacturing the goods here" (Anonymous 14 2011). To this end, he argues, the state government has put in place a range of incentives.

However, while there is widespread openness to Chinese entrepreneurial investment in manufacturing, the reservations about the treatment of local workers in Chinese enterprises, especially factories, remain. Yet even these undeniably serious concerns are often expressed in ways that are much more nuanced and contextualised than is sometimes suggested in commentary on China–Africa relations. While it is widely believed that poor pay and conditions are a problem in many Chinese-owned factories, this problem is not necessarily seen to be unique to them. Indeed, it is often suggested that while Chinese factories may be among the worst offenders, similarly poor conditions are to be found in other foreign- and locally owned enterprises (see also Yan and Sautman 2013 for a similar argument in the case of Zambia's mining sector). The problem, therefore, comes to be framed not so much as a particular issue with Chinese factories, but rather as a wider challenge on the national manufacturing scene.

Exemplifying this, a senior official of the NLC in Lagos insists that the prevailing labour conditions in Chinese manufacturing companies are little worse than those in other foreign-owned industrial enterprises in Nigeria:

Basically whether you talk about the Chinese, the Lebanese [or] the Indians, they have the same kind of business attitude. [...]they try to cut cost, that's labour cost (Anonymous 15 2010).

He makes it clear that the NLC and its affiliated unions have no particular animosity towards Chinese manufacturers. Indeed, when the NLC picketed a Hong Kong Chinese-owned factory in Lagos in 2002 over its use of casual workers, this action was part of a wider campaign against casualisation by local and multinational manufacturers in general (Ibharunefe 2002; Onoshevwe 2003). Alongside the Chinese company, other targets of the NLC's agitation were Nigerian companies such as the Eleganza Group and well-known multinationals like Cadbury's, Dunlop, Guinness and Unilever (Ibharunefe 2002; Onoshevwe 2003).

Furthermore, Chinese manufacturers in Nigeria attract respect and even praise for being among the most resilient manufacturers in the country and continuing to invest in what is widely regarded as an extremely challenging industrial environment. For example, the Director-General of MAN argues,

[We] appreciate their investments in Nigeria; they are still very committed to investing, they have confidence in our economy no matter the situation, whether you have religious problem or Niger Delta problem or political problem, they believe they can still [invest]. So as far as I am concerned, the Chinese have assisted also in developing Nigeria. [...] They have never wavered. (Anonymous 4 2011)

One of his colleagues estimates that Chinese industrialists are responsible for at least 60 per cent of the investment that has been made in the country's manufacturing sector (Anonymous 4 2011). The latter reports, "In all facets of industry we have Chinese dominating", and provides the example of the steel industry where he points to five Chinese companies which are major players, including one which he believes to be the largest steel producer in West Africa.

Given the high rate of unemployment in Nigeria, the substantial number of local jobs created by Chinese manufacturers is especially appreciated. For example, one of the two largest Hong Kong Chinese manufacturing conglomerates is noted by a number of Nigerian and Chinese respondents for employing approximately 7,000 locals in Kano, and some 20,000 Nigerians across the country. Significantly, such important contributions to employment have produced some

tolerance of the poor pay and conditions generally associated with Chinese manufacturers. Indeed, a senior official of the NUCFRLNMPE union in Kano, who is himself quick to praise Chinese manufacturers for creating employment, contends that even local workers tend to accept the conditions in Chinese factories for want of more lucrative alternatives. He reports:

Because of lack of job around, the workers will say “Oh, sorry sir, if they can pay us as they are saying, okay, no problem, let’s take it like that. Half bread is better than none” (Anonymous 7 2011).

## Building Bridges: Towards Conviviality, Cooperation and Mutual Benefit

Narratives of tension and conflict in Sino-African encounters are further disrupted by accounts that highlight more convivial and mutually beneficial outcomes. At the most basic level, there is some recognition that not all Chinese bosses are bad employers, with some apparently offering their workers better pay, conditions and prospects than many of their Chinese and non-Chinese counterparts. For example, even the Ghanaian assistant in a Chinese shop in Accra who feels he is badly treated by his current Chinese manager, and consequently claims to dislike Chinese people in general, warmly recalls his previous Chinese manager at the shop with whom he experienced a much more cordial and benevolent relationship:

He likes me, you know, I talk to him. [...] Crack some jokes, you know. [...] Oh, that man, I prefer him a lot [...]. Although he’s not having the money, he just tell you, “Just take this, OK, to survive” (Anonymous 6 2011).

In the manufacturing sector, a report by officials of the NLC found labour relations that were “regarded as a model in the industry” in a well-known Chinese textile factory in Lagos State (Atomre et al. 2009: 352). Similarly, the NUCFRLNMPE union representative in Kano highlights a Hong Kong Chinese-owned manufacturing group in the city as being open to the union and for “doing better” than most of the city’s industries to provide decent employment (Anonymous 7 2011). The Chinese manager of this factory stressed that, despite the increasing costs of manufacturing in Nigeria, the owner likes to pay

good wages to his workers as it encourages commitment and hard work (Anonymous 16 2011).

Furthermore, while skilled and managerial positions in Chinese enterprises tend to be dominated by Chinese staff, in many cases locals have been given the opportunity to attain at least some of these positions (see also Bourdarias 2010; Lee 2009; Yan and Sautman 2010). Chinese bosses emphasise that this makes good business sense – not only does it reduce the cost of recruiting increasingly expensive expertise from China but local managerial and technical staff are also particularly helpful in understanding the local market, managing local workers and negotiating the demands of local officials. In this way, many Chinese bosses have come to rely on senior local staff, and enduring and often close Sino-African relationships have ensued. For example, in the Hong Kong Chinese manufacturing group in Kano noted for its decent conditions, the Chinese manager spoke admiringly of the three Nigerian technicians who have worked with the company for over a decade since being recruited straight after graduating from a local university (Anonymous 16 2011). The manager was proud that the technicians had gradually taken over the responsibilities of their older Chinese counterparts and risen to senior positions, including that of chief electrical engineer for the group. Similarly, in one of the Chinese factories in Tema, the manager is a Ghanaian who has become the owner's closest and most trusted deputy, having worked for him since the company was founded some 30 years ago. He oversees the 58 local staff and three Chinese technicians at the factory and regards the Chinese owner as “a brother” who has helped him greatly over the years, especially by enabling him to educate his children and sending him to China for medical treatment (Anonymous 17 2011).

With local staff attaining more senior positions in Chinese enterprises, Ghanaians and Nigerians have come to know Chinese people not only as bosses but also as colleagues, creating opportunities for the development of some highly convivial relations. Golden Telecoms, one of the three major Chinese telecommunication companies that have entered the Nigerian market since the late 1990s, has explicitly pursued a strategy of recruiting a high proportion of local staff for the reasons outlined above. A former Nigerian staff member reports that there is a Nigerian-to-Chinese staff ratio of about 2:1 in Golden Telecoms' Lagos office, with a good number of local staff in

middle management positions (Anonymous 18 2010). However, there are complaints that Chinese staff sometimes appear to be favoured and that, contrary to official policy, meetings are occasionally held largely in Chinese. Furthermore, there is some resentment that a free canteen is provided for the exclusive use of Chinese staff, a practice that one Nigerian staff member describes as “almost racist” (Anonymous 19 2010). Nonetheless, the overall consensus among Nigerian staff was that their working relationships with Chinese colleagues are generally good and often friendly. For example, another Nigerian staff member remarks that he has “made a lot of Chinese friends” at the company, adding,

We all go for lunch, [they] take me to [a] Chinese restaurant for their food, I take them to [a] Nigerian restaurant, then they eat Nigerian food! (Anonymous 20 2010)

Similarly, when we visited the Lagos headquarters of a Chinese company that sells quarry machinery in Nigeria, we found a smart open-plan office staffed by what immediately appeared to be a very happy and close team of two Chinese and two Nigerians. We learnt that the four men all knew each other from China, the two Nigerians being among an increasing number of their compatriots who have studied and/ or worked there in recent years. The Nigerians had joined the company during their time in China, and early in 2009 one of them was sent with one of their Chinese colleagues to establish a sales office in Nigeria. The two pioneers worked closely together and formed a strong bond, the Chinese colleague remarking of his Nigerian counterpart,

We try our best to do our jobs, and everything I did, he know, and everything he did, I know. We help each other. [...] He is Nigerian and I am a Chinese, so most of the time I need his help! (Anonymous 21 2010)

The four men are all of a similar age, speak each other’s languages and have clearly become good friends. As one of the Nigerian staff member enthuses of his Chinese colleagues:

You know, I love my Chinese. When they come in, two, three days they have mixed up with the society [...]. They find it so interesting, you know, going around. Now like Robert, he doesn’t want to go back again, he is like stuck here! He doesn’t want to go back. [He says,] “Wow, Nigeria, I love it” and he’s even planning

[on] bringing his girlfriend around and he will have a kind of permanent residence here. They love it, they love it! (Anonymous 21 2010)

Beyond such opportunities to enjoy convivial, cross-cultural interactions, working with Chinese companies can also provide Africans with the chance to develop their skills, advance their careers, and pursue new business opportunities. In the Lagos “China Town”, for example, one of the growing number of Nigerians who have rented shops in the complex reports that he has built his business interests on the back of contacts he has made while working for Chinese enterprises (Anonymous 24 2010). As an engineering student, Mr. Joseph had developed an interest in Chinese technology and upon graduation was keen to gain experience working with it. A relative who worked at a local Hong Kong Chinese-owned factory helped him to secure a job there and this enabled him not only to develop his professional skills and experience but also to become “friends” with some of his Chinese colleagues. One of these introduced him to a Chinese entrepreneur who wanted to begin trading in Nigeria with a view to establishing a manufacturing business. Mr. Joseph helped him identify a market niche and then left the factory to work as the manager of the new enterprise, which was based in “China Town”. After a few years, the Chinese entrepreneur decided that local conditions were not conducive to establishing a factory and returned to China. But through this entrepreneur and the “China Town” complex, Mr. Joseph had further developed his network of Chinese contacts in both Nigeria and China and was able to take advantage of this to establish his own business importing Chinese goods. His contacts in China help him to identify suppliers and assist him when he visits, and his Chinese “friends” in “China Town” provide interpretation services if there are any communication difficulties when he makes telephone calls to China. Today, Mr. Joseph has one of the largest and most popular shops in “China Town” and is also utilising his network to pursue his long-standing ambition to mine minerals in southeast Nigeria for export to China, his contacts having introduced him to Chinese investors who are interested in supporting the project.

Similarly, working for Golden Telecoms has enabled local staff to launch careers in Nigeria’s rapidly growing telecoms industry and wider corporate sector. The intensive, often hands-on training and rapid early-career promotion it offers are seen by current and former

Nigerian staff to provide the skills and experience necessary to secure better-paid jobs with the company's American and European competitors and other "blue-chip" firms. Some Nigerian Golden Telecoms staff have used the expertise they have developed at the company to go on to establish or augment dynamic new Nigerian companies both within and beyond the telecoms sector. For example, a Nigerian former Golden Telecoms senior staff member left the company to join one of Nigeria's major up-and-coming technology and engineering firms in 2009 and was rapidly promoted through its ranks. Now the Chief Operating Officer of the company, which has grown to employ nearly 200, he attributes his meteoric rise to what he learnt at Golden Telecoms. "I think the whole glory goes back to where I am coming from", he contends, "I was well tutored on how to run operations and how to do so many things so the glory goes back to Golden Telecoms" (Anonymous 22 2010). As Brautigam (2003) has suggested in the case of auto-parts manufacturers in southeast Nigeria, it would appear that contact with Chinese businesses can enable African entrepreneurs to develop new skills and capabilities and establish spin-off ventures of their own.

## Conclusion

It is clear that the growing Chinese presence in Ghana and Nigeria has excited some notable tensions, particularly around the activities of Chinese traders and the treatment of local workers. This has led to some negative, racialised stereotyping of "the Chinese" and has occasionally been accompanied by apparent threats of violence against Chinese people and their investments. However, we have seen that narratives of conflict around the Chinese presence are generally much more nuanced than this. What are regarded by some local interests as negative impacts associated with the activities of Chinese migrant entrepreneurs are often seen to be inevitable and not always undesirable outcomes of globalisation, little different to the effects of investments made by local and other international actors. It is also apparent that the tensions that do emerge around the Chinese presence tend to not simply pit Chinese actors against African actors but rather expose competing African interests (see also Axelsson and Sylvanus 2010; Dittgen 2010; Scheld 2010). For example, African traders who directly import goods from China and have led much of the agitation

against Chinese traders have come up against African distributors and consumers who do not have such transnational capabilities and have come to appreciate Chinese traders as a cheap source of Chinese goods. Similarly, government officials often appear to be more interested in developing diplomatic and economic relationships with China than they are in responding to calls by various civil society actors, such as trade unions, to more firmly regulate some of the activities of Chinese investors (see also Baah, Otoo, and Ampratwurm 2009). In such ways, responses to the Chinese presence appear to have as much to do with the politics of African societies as they do with the politics of China–Africa relations (see also, Mohan and Lampert 2013).

Furthermore, we have seen that Sino-African encounters can extend beyond tension and conflict to involve more convivial relations. However, it is important not to idealise these convivial encounters, as the positionality of local actors is again key. For example, while the most senior Nigerian manager in a Chinese factory in Lagos made it clear that he is on very friendly terms with his Chinese boss and believes him to be a kind and generous employer (Anonymous 23 2010), it has been reported that local manual workers in the same factory are paid low wages, do not have contracts and have been discouraged from forming a union. Just as Appiah argues that cosmopolitanism can be the “warm glow of imperialism” (cited in Knowles 2007: 6), there is a danger that apparently convivial relations can represent the warm glow of exploitation. It is therefore necessary to consider the class alliances involved in such relations. Nonetheless, the development of more convivial Sino-African relations is an important channel through which at least some African actors are able to leverage benefits from the Chinese presence. Furthermore, it is also clear that local actors can at times exert meaningful resistance to aspects of the relationship that run contrary to their interests. While the encounters that result may be less convivial, they have rarely become specifically “anti-Chinese” or violent. Any attempts to whip up such sentiments would have to overcome both the nuanced way in which Sino-African encounters are widely understood and the more convivial and mutually beneficial relations that appear to be more developed than is often assumed.

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