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Making space for African agency in China-Africa engagements: Ghanaian and Nigerian patrons shaping Chinese enterprise

Ben Lampert and Giles Mohan

The dominant assumption in much literature on the Chinese presence in Africa is that the monolithic entity 'China' - and the Chinese state in particular - is able to set the terms of engagement with African states and to unilaterally determine events. This is problematic for two linked reasons that we examine in this chapter. First, it privileges unitary states as the key players in these relationships. Second, it underplays the role that African actors, both within and beyond the state, play in brokering and shaping the terms on which these relationships unfold. A ramification of this tendency to attribute all the power to one side is a reactive 'anti-China' response since Africans are assumed to be the helpless victims. Indeed, we have seen some African political actors playing up this negative portrayal of the Chinese, which produces a potentially dangerous xenophobia. While we are not arguing that China is only a beneficial force in Africa, in this chapter we examine how African agency can shape these relationships, many of which lie outside official inter-state channels. While African agency in China-Africa relations takes many forms, involves a wide array of actors and operates at a range of levels (Mohan and Lampert 2013), here we argue that the state-society interface is a key arena in which African agency is exercised, particularly by African patrons who utilise their state connections to encourage and support Chinese enterprise. While these actors may be based in or connected to the state, their interest in facilitating Chinese activities often appears to have more to do with their own political and economic interests than wider state agendas. The result is a more mixed and contradictory analysis than one in which coherent state interests intersect and 'China' drives the relationship.

The chapter begins with an overview of how we can think about African agency and the linkages between 'state' and 'society'. We argue against the Weber-inspired theories that locate African practices in long-standing cultural predispositions and often lack the empirical support for their claims. In arguing for a more empirically informed analysis of patronage and networks we use data from our West African case studies of Ghana and Nigeria. We frame this around three 'scales' of patronage ranging from relatively petty graft up to elite politics.

Reinserting African agency

In making a case for reinserting African agency into the China-Africa debates we are reminded of older discussions around dependent development. The neo-Marxist accounts of the 1970s were a useful corrective to ideas of developmental catch-up. The limitations of this neo-Marxist approach were soon realized (Skocpol 1985) and in seeing African development as ultimately determined by capitalism they tended to reduce the specificity of the political process in Africa. That said, these approaches usefully focused on what they termed comprador elites who brokered the entry of foreign capital into Africa (Leys 1996).

As noted analysis of Africa's contemporary engagements with China repeat these older debates in that it underplays African agency. Where African agency is noted, the focus is overwhelmingly on formal bilateral relations between Chinese and African state actors (Holslag 2011, Large 2009). However, the 'black box' nature of these state-to-state deals often makes it difficult to specify the precise role of African agency in determining their nature and outcomes. Nonetheless, such work does at least demonstrate that African state agency creates a political context which Chinese actors have to negotiate (e.g. Carmody and Taylor 2010, Holslag 2011).

Approaches to the African state that seek to blur its boundaries with wider society is not simply a theoretical exercise but an empirical imperative given that China-Africa relations incorporate an increasingly diverse range of actors beyond the formal realm of the state. As China's renewed engagement with Africa has developed, we see a growing presence of private Chinese multinationals and a profusion of Chinese small and medium scale enterprises (Gu 2009), all of which are associated with increasing flows of Chinese professionals, entrepreneurs, and workers. It is estimated that there are now in the region of a million Chinese migrants in Africa and evidence is emerging of how they interact with a wide array of African actors, from customers and employees to colleagues and partners (Mohan et al 2014). Consequently, there is growing recognition that the everyday Sino-African encounters this brings about in the social realm are a key factor in determining how China-Africa relations unfold (Alden 2007).

Theorising African agency within and beyond the state

Given that China-Africa relations are clearly inter-national, a starting point for thinking about African agency is in international relations (IR). Particularly helpful here is Wight's attempt to construct 'a structurally aware, although non-structuralist, theory of IR' (Wight 2004: 270). While Wight is primarily concerned with the realm of the state, his three-layered account of agency (Wight 1999) is profoundly social and usefully avoids an artificial separation between the two spheres. His first meaning of agency relates to the commonsense view in which agents have accountability, intentionality and subjectivity. This Wight terms 'agency₁'. However, as we are all reflexive and embedded actors there is no pure 'I' unencumbered by social forces even if we are able to act. This notion of 'embodied intentionality' (Wight *ibid.*: 132) relates to Wight's second dimension – 'agency₂' - in which agents are 'an agent of something'. This social context refers to 'the socio-cultural system into which persons are born and develop' (Wight *ibid.*: 133). There is a recursive aspect to this since individuals can reproduce or transform these collective identities, although Wight acknowledges 'not all agents are equally placed or positioned' (Wight *ibid.*: 133). The third dimension of Wight's framework is the roles that agents inhabit although Wight prefers the term 'positioned practices' to reflect the non-normative aspect of this. However, these positioned practices – or agency₃ – are structural insofar as they refer to properties that 'persist irrespective of the agents that occupy them' (Wight *ibid.*: 133) and Wight uses the figure of the diplomat as an example. For Wight any invocation of agency requires all three dimensions; that is they are 'co-constituted' and can only be analysed empirically.

A key analytical implication of Wight's tripartite approach to agency, especially agency₂ and agency₃ – the social context and roles - is to radically diversify what we might mean by politics and hence political action. Here the work of Hagmann and Péclard (2010) is instructive in which their 'analytic of statehood' concerns the dynamic and always undetermined, but not random, process of state (de)construction which is a multi-level phenomenon. Their heuristic framework comprises diverse actors, many of whom lie outside formal political structures, and the resources and repertoires they deploy in shaping their political authority. Similarly, Jessop's (1990: 342) strategic-relational theory of the state contends that the state is an ensemble of institutions which can never achieve full separation from society. Hence the boundaries between 'state' and 'society' are porous and the operations of states 'depend on a wide range of micro-political practices dispersed throughout society'.

These 'state in society' approaches seek to retain the state as an actor in society but also to see society shaping the state. They bring us away from the abstract level of global 'structures' and coherent 'states' to a more emergent and messy process of materialist

politics. Here the role of social networks and intersections of social identity becomes key, and it is to this that we now turn.

Actors, networks, and intersections

In the context of Africa, 'state in society' approaches have a long lineage and include debates on neo-patrimonialism (Hyden 1983, Bach 2012, Bratton and van de Walle 1994, Médard 1982), prebendalism (Joseph 1987, Obadare and Adebaniwi 2013), and the Weberian turn of Bayart and others (Bayart 1993, Hibou 1999). These analyses refute "the very notion that there exists a clear frontier between private and public spheres" (Bayart 2000: 243). The Weberian group of authors argue that the state is a western invention and has been artificially imposed on African societies and so masks "the realities of deeply personalized political realities" (Chabal and Daloz 1999: 16). Their historicism traces these 'realities' back and so implies that African societies are somehow predisposed to such practices, without looking at how transnational forces undermined and shaped African political agency. Moreover, given the clandestine nature of these networks there is very little evidence of how they function politically so that we need, in the vein of Wight and Jessop, to "integrate the analysis of social dynamics with a closer examination of African state logics" (Nugent, 2010: 37).

This social network analysis of the state overlaps with literature on informalism and ethnic entrepreneurship (Meagher 2010). Meagher (2010) traces how social network analysis sought to transcend the unhelpful dualism of in/formality, but – and echoing the critique of Bayart and those working in the same vein – these remained culturally essentialist, ahistorical and undertheorised. As a result they tend to flatten the diversity of different networks and in doing so lose "focus on institutional content, power relations and the nature of relations with the state" (p.23).

Meagher's critique of broad-brush social network analysis concludes that "[S]pecific realities of occupational history and class as well as ethnic origins are shown to shape the embedded values and practices of a given network" (p.24). This usefully points to a contextual and intersectional understanding of the relationship between class, cultural capital, gender and ethnicity (Ellis, 2011) and their connection to development impacts. Here the spatiality of intersections is key and we have to understand place-based processes of political, economic, and cultural positioning. Valentine's work (2007) focuses on the experiential aspects of intersectionality, which is fluid and malleable. It changes in different spaces and in relation to those occupying those spaces such that the same person in one space may be subject to very different powerful positionings and openings in another. That said, the smaller Chinese firms we examine are capitalist and so we have to acknowledge the accumulation imperative in any relationship with African actors and the possibility of exclusion, marginalisation, and exploitation. We also need to examine how different networks intersect. Long (2000: 197-198) uses the notion of the 'interface' to highlight the "critical points of intersection between multiple life-worlds or domains where discontinuities exist based on discrepancies in values, interests, knowledge and power". He sees the resultant processes of negotiation occurring in 'arenas' (Long and Villarreal 1993, Long and van der Ploeg 1994) which, being highly contextual, can only be investigated empirically (see also Brown 2012, De Bruijn et al 2007).

In terms of the networks and values involved in Chinese migrant business, much of the literature has taken a Weberian line (Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993), which tends to posit cultural closure and the essentialising of 'groups' (Meagher 2012, Greenhagh 1994). Here we get closed communities and 'ethnic' economies built around *guanxi*. However, Meagher (2012) argues that Chinese firms can play a brokerage role between enterprises. Here she uses Brautigam's (2003) work on 'flying geese industrialisation' where the Chinese presence can kick start local economic development. By contrast, when Meagher examines

Hart's (1996) work on Taiwanese firms in South Africa we get a political economy of casualisation and under-cutting, which is anything but developmental. Meagher usefully argues that when Chinese networks 'touch ground' in Africa they become more like African networks. By this she means that in the period after many African countries gained independence Chinese firms enjoyed supportive and regularised relations with African states, but more recently newly arriving firms encounter a less supportive environment and enter various 'irregular activities' such as clientelism, illegal foreign exchange transactions and bribery.

As various authors note, we can only really understand the dynamics of such processes through contextual, empirical study. 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 researchⁱ 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. All respondents and associated companies have been anonymised, and where names have been used, these are pseudonyms.

African agency in action

Our analysis focuses primarily on the role of individuals and networks that transcend a 'state' or 'society' location. Rather than fixed 'locations' we focus on the 'arenas' and 'intersections' where state-based and more social forms of agency interact. A key arena in which African agency comes to the fore in China-Africa relations is at the interface between Chinese enterprises and African actors with positions in, or connections to, the state. Across this interface, we see the emergence of what can be described as patron-client relations. In these relationships, a patron "uses his (sic.) own influence and resources to provide protection or benefits" to a client "who, for his (sic.) part, reciprocates by offering generous support and assistance, including personal service" (Scott 1972: 92, quoted in Hicken 2011: 292). Such relationships are generally structured around distinct power asymmetries, with the patron in the privileged position of possessing resources to which the client requires access (Eisenstadt and Roniger 1980, Erdmann and Engel 2007, Hicken 2011). Significantly, in the relations we describe below, it is the African actors who occupy the ascendant role of the patron, utilising their locally-embedded social, economic and political resources to facilitate and support the activities of their Chinese clients, who in turn reciprocate with financial rewards, the provision of services and mutually-beneficial business opportunities. In this way, Chinese migrant entrepreneurs are not only incorporated into the blurred realm between public and private interests that defines the neo-patrimonialism observed in many African states, but also become dependent on local bureaucratic and political elites for their economic survival and success.

We structure our exploration of the role of African patrons in furthering Chinese enterprise around a scaling of patron-client relations that encompasses different motivations, forms of agency, and strategy. The first emerges out of everyday graft in which African officials exact payments, or local brokers control imports. Here agency is very much with the African actors, and the Chinese businesses often experience the demands involved as an operational inconvenience, albeit a serious one that can shape business decisions and social activities. However, the prevalence of these relations can also create opportunities for Chinese entrepreneurs to navigate bureaucratic procedures and restrictions, and this can lead to the development of on-going, reciprocal relations with African officials who then become critical to sustaining Chinese enterprise. The second set of patron-client relations revolves around a more proactive and convivial form of networking for 'smoothing' business relations

and accessing contracts, and is not necessarily dependent on direct unofficial payments. While more even in terms of power, the Africans able to participate in such negotiations tend to be local business and bureaucratic elites and so both sides use these relationships to reinforce their status and positions. Finally, are more purposive uses of Chinese investment by high-level African state-based and state-connected elites for grander political and economic projects. These shade into those state-based accounts of agency we identified as being the most studied in terms of China-Africa relations, but we show that these projects are often entwined with the personal interests of the African patrons as much as wider state agendas. While Chinese businesses actively seek and knowingly benefit from these high-level relationships, they nonetheless become vulnerable to the vicissitudes of local politics.

Everyday graft

For Chinese entrepreneurs in Ghana and Nigeria, African agency most often manifests itself at the state-society interface in the form of pervasive petty corruption by African state officials. While there is some acknowledgement that a good number of their co-nationals may not be fully compliant with local regulations, there is a strong and widespread sense among Chinese respondents that the frequent attention of local officials tends to be motivated primarily by a desire to extract unofficial and often unjustified payments rather than enforce the law. For example, a Chinese entrepreneur based in Lagos remarked:

[...T]he cost for Chinese to stay here, the cost is too high. [...]. I used to go outside with car. When police catch me they will hold my driving licence, he will now ask for, even I don't have any problems, he will ask for money [...]. That's why I will always be afraid if I see police or LASTMA [Lagos State Traffic Management Authority], [...], what they want is money, big money. (Interview, Lagos, September 2010)

Significantly, these experiences of apparent corruption are felt to have a notable effect on the social lives and investment decisions of Chinese entrepreneurs. As a Kano-based Hong Kong Chinese entrepreneur contended:

[...T]he immigration, they always come out to catch people. Even go to restaurant, so the Chinese scare to come out. Sometimes they catch them, ask 500, 5000 US dollar. [...] So people scared to come out so their lifestyle change. They go to this family's house, gather together and limit the times come out. (Interview, Kano, February 2011)

The Chinese manager of an electrical equipment outlet in Kano concurred, and added that such actions on the part of officials also “block social development” by discouraging foreign investors (Interview, Kano, December 2010).

However, African actors' utilisation of state roles and connections to exploit the Chinese presence can also further Chinese enterprise by establishing ongoing relations of mutual benefit. As some Chinese respondents admitted, making unofficial payments can help negotiate bureaucratic hurdles such as obtaining the necessary immigration documents or permits to undertake particular economic activities. “[Y]ou have to identify those who can be useful to you,” argued an Accra-based Chinese shop manager, “and if it means you have to spend some money to them for them to get what you want and to pave a way for you, we do that, that's life” (Interview, Accra, May 2011, interpreter's translation from Chinese). Some well-established Chinese entrepreneurs in Ghana and Nigeria support McNamee et al's (2012) argument that recent Chinese migrants are predisposed to deploy financial incentives in these ways because there is a strong culture of corruption around business in China.

However, other long-standing Chinese entrepreneurs suggest that newcomers simply lack the confidence and linguistic skills to stand-up to the intimidation and demands of local officials in what they see as a system of corruption very much driven by African actors. Indeed, recently-arrived Chinese entrepreneurs tended to assert that low-level business corruption has been much reduced in China in recent years and that it was a major challenge to adapt to its prevalence in Ghana and Nigeria. Whatever the main drivers, established and recent Chinese migrants generally agreed that having to engage local systems of corruption was unavoidable. As the Chinese manager of a Chinese company's Ghana outlet contended, "[...If you don't follow [the system], you can't stay here!]" (Interview, Tema, August 2011).

Mutually-beneficial relationships with African state-based and state-connected actors are especially important for Chinese entrepreneurs who wish to circumvent local regulations. In both Ghana and Nigeria there have been complaints from some local traders and manufacturers about the growing influx of Chinese-made goods, particularly textiles, and this has prompted government action to stem the flow, including the imposition of import bans and then prohibitive tariffs in Nigeria (see Axelsson 2012 for the Ghanaian case). However, it is widely recognised that such measures have been undermined by local and Chinese traders engaging in large-scale smuggling facilitated by unofficial payments to enforcement officials. As a senior figure in the Lagos business community contended of government attempts to reduce Chinese imports, "...[T]he Customs are making good money from it because it creates room for corruption" (Interview, Lagos, February 2011). Indeed, a respondent who has been closely involved in the Lagos 'China Town' retail complex, which housed several hundred Chinese traders at the height of its activity in the early- to mid- 2000s and became a key channel for the importation of Chinese goods to Nigeria, suggested that making regular payments to local customs officials enabled the complex's traders to evade import bans and openly sell substantial volumes of contraband goods. This echoes Chalfin's (2008) work on members of Ghana's Customs, Excise and Preventive Service who are key actors that both represent the state at its borders and so endow the territory with legitimacy but who also subvert this by withholding release of goods in return for 'unofficial' payments. As Boone (1994: 462) argues in her study of trade liberalisation in Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire, "fraud and contraband pit 'state agents against the state'".

While this arrangement was severely disrupted in 2005-6 when the growing agitation of Nigeria's manufacturing lobby prompted high profile customs raids and the temporary closure of 'China Town,' some of the traders who remained in the complex were able to re-establish their connections with officials, and continue trading in contraband goods. In these relationships, a central role is played by local clearing agents, as a Nigerian involved in a Chinese-founded trading business in the Lagos 'China Town' detailed:

[...N]ow the agents and the customs officers they are, you know, into good rapport. Like the agent we're using, [...], the man is good. If he tell you today your goods is coming, it is coming. [...] So you know customs have to meet money. [...N]ow, in 24 hours, [...], you can clear goods. [...]. [...T]hey know that it's contraband, all these are contraband. But then because of their rapport together, so no problem. (Interview, Lagos, September 2010)

Similarly, in Kano, where many Chinese traders attempted to relocate after the Lagos 'China Town' was temporarily shut down, a Chinese textile wholesaler described how a local agent maintains what has become a major alternative route for smuggling Chinese products:

There is more Custom [in Lagos] but for Kano they find another way. They ship the container [to] Cotonou or Lomé then they take the goods to Niger, a city called

Maradi [near the border with Nigeria]. There is one people if he allow, normally there is one day in each week he allow this day take all the goods to Kano” (Interview, Kano, December 2010).

This agent appears to have become well-known in the city, a representative of the local business community bemoaning his activities and highlighting the importance of his high-level political connections in enabling him to facilitate the lucrative illicit trade in Chinese goods:

[...H]ere in Kano we have somebody that we don't like because he is a party to the smuggle of most of these textile goods. [...H]e is the one that clears the goods through the border with Niger Republic. He clears them in the guises of another product inside the container but unfortunately it was a contraband but because he is a very strong man in politics, he is a strong man in the ruling party, [he is able to do this]. [...T]he Chinese are hiding behind this man. This man can bring anything to this country as far as import is concerned. Whatever you want him to bring to this country he can bring it for you. He is just a clearing agent but he is so strong because at one time he had a very strong relationship with the former leadership [of the country] and he takes that advantage up to this leadership and he is still using it. (Interview, Kano, February 2011)

Such a critical brokering role echoes Walther's (2009) more general and historical point about how mobility and trade have been central to Sahelian economies. This trade, he argues, is mediated by patrons who are the wealthy and powerful merchants who control border flows and distribution channels, and who mark their status with ostentatious investments in local society (e.g. building mosques). Distributionally, and echoing Bayart, these patrons are “a small number of operators who enjoy privileged relationships within the states” (2000: 10). As such, these networks tend to enhance the position of elites, something that can merge with their wider political aspirations. Indeed, Tidjani Alou (2012) details how large-scale traders in Niger are intimately linked to political office holders, providing them with financing for their political parties in return for protection from the customs authorities.

Convivial connections

As noted above, some argue (McNamee et al 2012: 22) that given the nature of China's ‘nomenklatura’ capitalism, patronage and graft are part of Chinese business life. The argument goes that when Chinese migrants come to Africa they slot in because such practices are familiar. While this has some value, it is important to avoid a simplistic argument that ‘the Chinese’ simply export the capitalism they know best since this is a restatement of the China agency versus African victim dynamic rather than a relational one. It is clear that such patronage networks need to be seen in a more complex way that recognises the interplay of capitalist imperatives, dynamic racial and ethnic positionings, and state power. Nyíri (2011), using Bonacich (1973), argues that Chinese migrants operate as ‘middlemen minorities’ in economic frontiers, ranging from Eastern Europe after the fall of Communism through to contemporary Africa and South-East Asia. He argues that “Seeking the patronage of local political elites in exchange for protection against xenophobic attacks and the vulnerability created by legal discrimination was typical of colonial ‘middleman minorities’ and persisted in some postcolonial states...But the rise of China as a coveted market and the increase of its clout as a world power have made the power dynamics of such patronage networks more complex” (p.148). A corollary of this in his Hungarian study (Nyíri 2005: 668) is that Chinese migrants “have been largely uninterested in enfranchisement as a group, cultivating

instead personal relationships with officials and recruiting middlemen who broker between them and agents of the state”.

Such patronage has been identified in relations between African elites and Chinese business migrants. Haglund (2008, 2009) and Dobler (2008, 2009) both identify such relationships as important though they lack specific examples. For example, Haglund (2009: 639) states “political elites secure financial or other support by providing external capital interests with protection”. Dobler (2009) argues “the more established migrants form alliances with influential members of the host society in order to secure their status in an increasingly hostile environment” (p.708). He contends that this also enables the longer-established migrants to act as migration brokers for subsequent in-migrants from China.

While unofficial financial transfers such as those described above often appear to underpin such relationships, particularly at the state-society interface, our data suggest that they can also emerge out of less instrumental but nonetheless proactive ‘networking’ between Chinese entrepreneurs and African officials and state-connected business elites. Interpersonal Sino-African relationships are often framed as being dominated by tensions and conflict (Baah and Jauch 2009, Brooks, 2010; Giese 2012, 2013, Lee 2007, Lee 2009) but, as we have argued elsewhere (Mohan et al 2014), they can also involve more convivial relations and it is out of these that both formal and informal cooperation can develop. This is particularly apparent around well-established Chinese entrepreneurs who often enjoy a high degree of local embeddedness, being well-known within local business circles and having a wide range of local, often state-connected contacts who are happy to help them overcome challenges in what is often seen as a difficult business environment. As a Chinese shop worker in Accra reported of his Chinese employer:

“...[M]y boss like eighteen years ago he come to Ghana so he knows a lot [of local people]. That time when he come he knows a lot of big guys. Because like 18 years ago there is only a few Chinese people in Ghana, so and at that time [...], that company he worked for is very big, so he have a chance to contact with the many big guys in Ghana. So even the chief policeman is his friend [...]. [...]If [he] ha[s] any problems, [he] can solve [them]”. (Interview, Accra, May 2011)

Similarly, a member of a Chinese family business in Tema detailed how the firm was established in 2000 after his uncle was introduced to Ghana by a “Ghanaian friend” he had met whilst working in South Africa and who helped the company develop convivial and ultimately useful local relationships:

[...]It is the same friend who introduce us here, he helped us to show us the place where we can register and they introduce us to some [government] officer. [...]We also get some Ghanaian friends. [...]F]or maybe the business partners or the government officers, why we get help from them, [it’s because] we know each other. (Interview, Tema, August 2011)

Like a number of the more established Chinese entrepreneurs engaged in our study, both of these respondents argued that the assistance they are able to access through their extensive and influential local networks means that there is little or no need for them or their bosses to be members of the Chinese business associations established in Ghana and Nigeria. As the Tema-based respondent asserted, “[...]B]ecause we are here long we know most of the government office so any problem, it is not very serious, we just sort it ourselves” (Interview, Tema, August 2011). This very much resonates with Nyíri’s (2005: 668) point that Chinese

migrant entrepreneurs are often more interested in developing personal relationships with state-based and state-connected actors than in securing group-based interests.

Local contacts built through networking and convivial interactions can not only help Chinese entrepreneurs overcome the challenges of the local business environment but can also enable them to pursue new economic opportunities and develop their enterprises. This can be seen in the case of Mrs Lu, a Hong Kong Chinese entrepreneur based in Kano. She reports that she was only able to secure her nascent business selling beverages produced by a Lagos-based Chinese company when two of her Nigerian contacts offered to lend her the necessary finance to pay for the exclusive distribution rights for northern Nigeria. One of these local patrons was a long-standing customer of her existing fashion business and the other was a man she had known for 5 years from a casino they both frequented. Mrs Lu was deeply grateful for what she saw as their “kindness” and “generosity”, noting that they freely lent the money without demanding a share of the business or setting a time-scale for repayment (Interview, Kano, February 2011). To demonstrate her gratitude, Mrs Lu made them “partners” in the business and paid them handsome returns. For Mrs Lu, an added benefit of this relationship is that a close relative of one of the local partners is a senior police officer. He not only helped her when a local landlord attempted to defraud her but has also enabled her to take business risks she might not have done without his support. “I feel very secured“, she revealed, “even I give credit in the market because all the people know in the back is the [police officer]. Nobody thief my money”.

The decisive role that state-connected and state-based local patrons can play in furthering Chinese enterprise is especially apparent in the case of Dr Sheng, a Chinese medical doctor based in the Greater Accra Region who established a private clinic there in the mid-1990s having first come to Ghana in the mid-1980s as part of a health cooperation between the Chinese and Ghanaian governments. A Chinese entrepreneur who claimed to be familiar with Dr Sheng’s story argued that he had been able to establish his clinic because he had successfully treated the persistent knee problem of a very senior political office-holder, who in return “gave” Dr Sheng the land to build his clinic (Interview, Tema, June 2011). Certainly, Dr Sheng very much emphasised the role of this prominent figure in facilitating his career in Ghana, highlighting that at the end of each of his three successive three-year official postings at a Ghanaian military hospital, the official personally requested that he stayed on to continue working in Ghana. When he recounted his decision to establish his own private clinic at the end of his third posting, Dr Sheng recalls that he was able to overcome tight restrictions on foreign-trained private practitioners because he had worked closely with the Ghanaian government for nine years and “they made an exception,” enabling him to become what he believes to be the first foreigner to open a private medical clinic in Ghana (Interview, Greater Accra Region, August 2011). He clearly remained very grateful to his contacts in government who had given him this opportunity to build a life and business in a country to which he expressed a strong attachment, particularly the leading political figure who had supported him since his early years in Ghana and with whom he appeared to have developed something of an enduring friendship.

Elite politics

The case of Dr Sheng illustrates how the local connections of Chinese entrepreneurs in Ghana and Nigeria can reach the highest echelons of the state, and can play a critical role in the establishment and expansion of Chinese enterprise. While some of these high-levels links appear to be grounded principally in convivial relationships, they tend to emerge out of the conscious efforts of African elites to develop direct connections with ambitious Chinese entrepreneurs in order to further their own economic and political interests. Bayart (2000) argues that extraversion requires ‘active intermediation’ and that this has been a continuity

from pre-colonial, through colonial, and onto more recent ‘rentier’ political economies. The outcome is that this role adds “to the personal fortunes of whichever person or group was the gatekeeper of the system” (p.261). This suggests that African elites capable of acting as patrons use their relationship with foreign businesses to cement this position, potentially perpetuating neo-patrimonial practices among those based in or connected to the state. Furthermore, building on Long’s work, it is important to recognize not only how external interventions are mediated and transformed by local actors, but also how these actors can actively reach out and initiate interventions that might at first appear to be purely ‘external’.

This is clearly demonstrated in the case of Mr Daniel, a Lagos-based Nigerian entrepreneur who since the mid-2000s developed an explicit strategy of encouraging Chinese companies to partner with him in establishing enterprises in Nigeria. His aim is to become *the* person Chinese investors go through and partner with when entering Nigeria, and he plans to end up with a stake in a range of enterprises with Chinese partners - the proceeds from which he can live on when he retires. In addition to employing four Chinese craftsmen in his high-end furniture business, who he recruited from the China-based furniture supplier he imported from prior to undertaking his own production, Mr Daniel entered into a joint venture with a Chinese construction company that was about to leave Nigeria following the completion of a contract. He initially approached the company in Nigeria to propose the partnership and, having received an encouraging response, travelled to its headquarters in China to seal the deal. With the Chinese company providing equipment and “know-how” in the form of skilled labor, Mr Daniel’s contribution was to provide accommodation, manage in-country logistics and, most importantly, utilize his local knowledge and contacts to secure contracts. As he contended, “...[Y]ou can only give what you have, what I have in Nigeria is that the country is my country, I understand it very well, so I have to make use of it” (Interview, Lagos, October 2010).

What appear to be particularly important in this case are Mr Daniel’s political connections, not least to his brother who had recently held a senior state office and remained influential in the national political scene. Indeed, the first project undertaken by Mr Daniel and his Chinese partner was to convert a building divested by the arm of the state his brother had run into a hotel aimed at Chinese business visitors. Mr Daniel was excited that he had followed this up by winning a very lucrative government contract to construct a new state building. Seeking to further expand his business collaborations with Chinese companies, Mr Daniel had recently initiated joint-venture discussions with a Chinese medical equipment firm, representatives of which he had first met when they stayed at his hotel while visiting Lagos for a trade exposition, and the following week he was travelling to China to “search for companies that are ready to come and partner in Nigeria”. He contended of his links with Chinese companies, “I see the potential of running into hundreds upon hundreds millions of US dollars business partnering with them.” It would seem that by utilising his local knowledge and connections, particularly to the state, and by actively courting Chinese investment, Mr Daniel has not only been able to significantly advance his own commercial interests, but has also enabled his Chinese partners to access opportunities that might otherwise have been beyond their reach.

Similarly, in the case of the Lagos ‘China Town’ shopping complex, it was Chief Oladipo, a prominent Nigerian businessman and politician, who first brought over Mr Wu, the Chinese founder, as a business partner. While Chief Oladipo’s political exile in the early 1990s curtailed the development of their joint venture, his return in 1998 and assumption of an important political position the following year saw him support Mr Wu’s establishment of ‘China Town’ in Lagos - first in the upmarket Ikoyi district and, from 2002, at a larger site in Ojota on the eastern edge of the city. A political ally of Chief Oladipo argued that his intention in supporting the project was to attract Chinese entrepreneurs who would go on to

establish factories in Lagos, thereby generating local employment and supporting economic development. However, another respondent closely involved with the complex pointed out that it became a useful outlet for close relatives of Chief Oladipo involved in the large-scale importation of Chinese textiles. Whatever Chief Oladipo's intentions, he has seemingly remained a vital supporter of 'China Town,' respondents claiming that it is only with his backing that the complex has been able to remain open in the face of the protests and clampdowns it has attracted. It would again seem that an African patron has been central to the establishment and survival of a notable Chinese enterprise.

Conclusion

In terms of the on-going effects of these complex engagements, Chinese businesses do not radically alter pre-existing networks or practices of patronage in Africa. Indeed, they often reinforce the pervasiveness of patron-client relations and wider practices of neo-patrimonial governance. While there are some spin-offs for smaller-scale entrepreneurs and skills gains for rising professionals (see Mohan and Lampert 2013), it is often about African elites cementing their positions, not just in relation to the narrow confines of state power, but also in the wider realm of economic enterprise: this, in turn, has thrown up forms of African 'resistance.' This resistance is not explicitly 'anti-Chinese,' but rather moves beyond the cynical xenophobia of some responses to Chinese investments. For example, in 2010 in Nigeria there was a demonstration against the Dangote Group – the largest Nigerian industrial conglomerate headed by (reputedly) the wealthiest Nigerian - and its use of imported Chinese workers. The tenet of the protest was that Nigerian elites were being unpatriotic rather than a complaint against 'the Chinese' *per se*. Such an appeal speaks to the complex intersection of neo-liberal globalisation, state-business relations, patronage, and ethnicity that have been the focus of this chapter.

In seeking to move the analysis of China-Africa relations away from abstract or inter-state levels we focused on social networks and particularly forms of patronage where African agency is key. While African Studies has a history of theorising patronage-based politics, we found that many of these approaches tended to flatten the specificity of embedded social relations. As such, our analysis revealed that networked relations and agency are not uniform but incorporate multiple actors, interests, and processes, which can only be specified empirically. We also showed that social networks are tied to accumulation and the state as much as they are 'cultural'. Too much of the existing China and Africa work is posited on cultural essentialism and/or lapses lazily into arguing that 'the Chinese' are only concerned with profit. While we retained a focus on the materiality of these social relations we also showed that motivations of both African and Chinese actors are multiple and interlinked.

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