

China-Africa Relations Research Approaches

by Ruth Simbae

About to board a plane in Johannesburg, I handed my temporary boarding pass to the flight attendant who exclaimed, "Simbae, you have a *fung kong* boarding pass!" *Fung kong* is a slang term used in South Africa meaning fake, cheap, or low quality and is often associated with Chinese imports. In this case, the term was used to refer to a temporary pass issued earlier on my journey that needed to be replaced with a new boarding pass in Johannesburg.

In 1998 the term was made popular in South Africa by the Maseko Boys Isotso song titled "Fung Kong," which was a direct critique of low-quality Chinese imports that were perceived to be flooding the local market. As singer Sanyaka says, "We wrote this song as a protest against what the Chinese were doing to the black man" (Sanyaka 2000). Today, some fans acknowledge that the lyrics of the catchy tune were somewhat offensive, but negative stereotypes of Chinese people in Africa persist. In the 2001 performance *Amajingling*, produced by the Ethiopian Adugna Dance Company at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown, South Africa, the Chinese living in Africa were simplistically stereotyped as the paddlers of cheap goods who usurp the jobs of Africans. In some parts of Africa the removal of natural resources by Chinese companies is derogatorily referred to as the "Great Chinese Takeout."

It is estimated that trade between China and Africa has exploded from \$1 billion to more than \$100 billion in the last decade (Corbett 2012). Chinese-run mines have reopened mines in Zambia, and Nigeria the volume of trade between the two countries grew by nearly 100% between 2004 and 2008 (Ulinjei 2011). There is no doubt that economic relations between China and many African countries have recently soared and that human engagement through trade and other forms of global networking is on the rise. It is time now for meaningful research to dig deeper than a consideration of economic power, labor laws, and the *fung kong* hype. Until recently little in-depth research has existed on human relationships at an individual or community level, and even less research exists on China-Africa engagement in terms of culture or the



1. Michael MacGarry
The Master (2007)
From the African Architectural series
Photo: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND
STRECHING GALLERY

visual arts.¹ Contemporary, revived China-Africa relations provide not only valuable areas of research focus, but they also offer the opportunity for the pertinent critique of past approaches to fields of research.

TREMORS IN THE MEDIA

The largest hurdles to meaningful research on China-Africa relations are the distortions and exaggerations that infiltrate the media and the perpetuation of stereotypes. As Patrick J. Kiernan (2009:84–100) points out, the China-Africa discourse is often dichotomized as a "curse" or "curse" debate: "curse" as the Chinese are plunderers who reekoning Africa, or "curse" as the investment can save African economies and provide leverage against the West. Zimbabwe's president, Robert Mugabe, welcomed China when he declared in a speech in 2005, "We have turned east where the sun rises, and given our backs to the west where the sun sets" (Meldrum 2005). Western media, politicians, and diplomats tend to sensationalize the relationship between China and Africa, framing it largely as a curse. As Garth Le Pape (2008:27) writes, "the phobia and threat perception about China in Africa are largely products of Western-inspired hypocrisy and animosity, which are increasingly finding echoes among Africans themselves."

Some reports, particularly in the Western media, reveal panic. In an article with a giveaway title that suggests more concern for the protection of Western economies than the fate of Africans ("How China's Taking over Africa, and Why the West Should be VERY Worried"), Andrew Malone (2008) writes, "In the greatest movement of people the world has ever seen, China is recently working to turn the entire [African] continent into a new colony." In *The Telegraph*, David Blair (2007) asserts that China's relationship with Africa is directly comparable to Europe's Scramble for Africa, led by a

"ruthless collection of robber barons, imperialist ideologies, explorers, rogues and adventurers." Warning of a new Scramble, he writes, "With every day that passes, China's economic tentacles extend deeper into Africa." Yet Chinese Zambians interviewed in Scott Corbett's film *King Cobra and the Dragons* disproved these assumptions: their investment in Zambia was long term, they chose to hire Zambian rather than Chinese workers, and instead of being elitist they were comfortable with their children growing up as ordinary Zambians.

Too often this battle is only played out in the realm of politics-economics, paying little attention to day-to-day experiences of real African or Chinese people. This reflects the fact that the contemporary stories and myths of China-Africa relations have grown so fast that meaningful understanding of this phenomenon has not yet matured. In Michael MacGarry's photographic print *The Master* (Fig. 1) we discern a comparable fabrication of a story not yet fully unraveled. (MacGarry views this image as a photographic still of *He Jintan* and the *Scramble for Africa*, a film not yet made). With deliberate banality that attempts to turn inside out any power relations that might be hidden behind the photographic surface, MacGarry writes that behind this image of an African wearing an American military suit and an "African" mask that represents the Chinese president "is the gardener of my girlfriend's parents at their holiday house on the KwaZulu-Natal coast. His

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