Editorial

Migrations Between Africa and China: A Decentered Approach

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INTRODUCTION

Sino-African relations have generated much interest in the last 20 years and particularly in Europe and North America, as China has been emerging as a new center of power. However, research on Sino-African relations and the related migration flows has conceptualized Africa as only a site for power struggles between world powers, considering the governments and the people in Africa as lacking agency. They have both been considered mostly as passive recipients of policy changes or geopolitical power relations rather than active contributors to shaping those. In fact, Sullivan and Cheng (2018) point out that attempts to understand Sino-African migrations in the media and major publications are often tainted by stereotypes and undifferentiated notions of China and Africa. While it is true that these undifferentiated notions shape dominant discussions in the media (and at times also in academic research), it is equally true that asymmetries of power globally and between China and African countries are important in shaping those relations. Thus, critical analysis and research that unpack these asymmetries are just as important as acknowledging that people and governments in Africa are active agents of their own destinies. This special issue and this introductory paper form part of such an effort of a critical and decentered (Triandafyllidou, 2021) approach to Sino-African migrations.

Migration between China and Africa has increased significantly during the last 20 years alongside the growth of Sino-African trade from the 1990s onwards. Such growth in both trade and migration flows was part of a broader Chinese economic expansion to the African continent through loans, infrastructure development, and also scholarships (Cheru and Obi, 2010). The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) was established in 2000 specifically to cement relations between China and African countries. During the last 20 years, migration flows between China and

Africa both increased and diversified (Cissé, 2021). There are estimates ranging from tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands of Africans in China, with Nigerians constituting the largest number (Castillo, 2014), while there are estimates of one to two million Chinese migrants across Africa. However, in either case these estimates are generic and partly unreliable, as relevant statistical data do not exist or are outdated (Cissé, 2021).

This migration has particularly come under the spotlight during and after the pandemic because of the exacerbation of racist incidents registered against migrants from sub-Saharan Africa, particularly at the port city of Guangzhou in southeast China. Additionally, the focus on these migrants has sharpened because of the devastating effect of the pandemic on the type of cross-border trade that these traders and entrepreneurs had developed over the last 15 years (Mathews, 2022).

This special issue is inscribed within a slowly emerging critical area of research that discusses the nature, role, and importance of migration flows between China and sub-Saharan Africa. Such literature has paid particular attention to the business and trading practices of sub-Saharan African migrants in Guangzhou and Hong Kong, pointing to their largely informal and networked character, based on personalized trust, despite widespread lack of legal status (Mathews and Yang, 2012; Haugen, 2012; Castillo, 2014; Mathews, 2015a, 2015b; Min et al., 2016; Mathews et al., 2017; Lan, 2017). These studies have framed African migration to China as an expression of a "low-end" globalization process that happens informally, at the fringes of the world economy and which is to be contrasted to the "high-end" globalization of large corporations, transnational flows of capitals and goods, and formal international trade.

The special issue both complements and contradicts the above analytical perspectives. From our perspectives, considering whether the migration flows and related economic activities between Africa and China are a "low-end" or "high-end" globalization risks missing the point of how these flows and exchanges are inscribed into a wider ebb of social and economic power asymmetries and struggles. We seek therefore to develop a critical line of research, with a twofold objective. On the one hand, we aim to take a closer look at the diversified experiences of different types of migrants within each flow, including not only labor migrants or entrepreneurs but also marriage migrants and international students, investigating their intersectional and dynamic trajectories (as labor migrants who marry locally, or international students who become entrepreneurs, or petty traders who move transnationally). On the other hand, we seek to theorize the place of Africa and China in the remaking of centers (symbolically, politically, economically) in the twenty-first century by considering how migration flows and their representations in political and media discourses reflect power asymmetries and power struggles. We look at the China-Africa relationship not as a peripheral one (compared to the "Western" centers of power) but rather as a multi-polar one, inscribed into a broader framework where China and Africa are two poles alongside Europe or North America (and also

Eurasia, South America, or Southeast Asia). We thus seek to deconstruct notions of "periphery" and "center" and argue for multiple "centers." Eventually our special issue argues for a multiple decentering (Triandafyllidou, 2020) and nuanced understanding of emerging international migrations between China and Africa.

This introductory paper starts by outlining the contours of Sino-African migrations in the next section while the subsequent section reviews the existing literature and introduces our novel analytical and empirical perspectives presented in this special issue.

SINO-AFRICAN MIGRATIONS AND THEIR EVOLUTION

Scholarly research to understand the dynamics of the growing Sino-African migrations is broad, ranging from theoretical analysis to country-specific empirical studies on Chinese migrants in specific African countries, or African migrants in China, as well as studies that seek to link the related population flows to broader socioeconomic and geopolitical drivers.

Considering Chinese migration flows to different parts of Africa, these were driven by a variety of factors – not just Chinese infrastructural investment in African countries but also individual trajectories of traders or other types of workers. Earlier studies (Kuang, 2008) distinguished among three types of Chinese migrations to Africa: labor migration by big Chinese enterprises, entrepreneurial migration of traders, and what Kuang terms as proletarian migrations in transit in Africa to other parts of the world. Kuang (2008) relates these migratory flows to China's foreign policy goals in Africa while Park (2009) points to the evolution of these pathways (and the related integration patterns) in the 2000s. Park discusses how Chinese migrants to African countries came from mainly coastal provinces like Fujian, Guangdong, and Zhejiang and how over time, this expanded to include migrants from urban areas including Shanghai, Beijing, and Tianjin, as well as overseas. Park also highlights how specific workers choose their paths; for example, medical doctors come through government-government agreements, whereas construction workers and miners may rely on government-licensed private employment agencies. What are some of the long-term implications of these pathways and patterns? This volume features a contribution to this area, taking a deep dive into the rise of Afro-Chinese communities on the continent.

African migration to China has emerged also in the early years of the twenty-first century as China became a new destination for workers and traders (Bodomo and Ma, 2010). Two of the largest Chinese commodity markets, Yiwu and Guangzhou, attracted an increasing number of traders and aspiring entrepreneurs (Bodomo, 2010; Bodomo and Ma, 2010; Bodomo, 2012) generating a vibrant context of small trade and business activities, particularly in Hong Kong and Guangzhou. This type of socioeconomic activity was labeled as "low-end globalization" (Mathews and Yang, 2012) as it was characterized by small capital, unregulated markets, and oftentimes irregular migration status for the businesspeople involved. Mathews and

Yang (2012: 95) argue that China's economic role in manufacturing cheap goods "enables Africa and other developing-world regions to experience globalization." While such dynamics are certainly at play, we feel that the "low-end" vs "high-end" globalization framework tends to focus too much on the power of the state in shaping the migration trajectories of migrants, disregarding the role of migrant agency (Triandafyllidou, 2019). Indeed, Mathews and Yang (2012) themselves point to the importance of individual initiative, informal networks, trust relations, and flexible arrangements in these business relations.

Important insights on Sino-African migration flows can be given by studies that situate these migrations into the broader context of economic relations between China and specific African countries. Cissé (2013), for instance, compares Sino-African traders in China and Senegal with a view to delving deeper into migrations between world regions that have been hitherto considered "emerging" (like China) or "peripheral" (like African countries, for their most part) to global capitalism. However, these new migration flows, outside of dominant streams of South to North pathways, need to be studied within the context of a broader net of economic partnership relations between China and several African countries, as these have developed in the last two decades. Chinese economic investments for infrastructural projects in Africa carry with them important geopolitical implications too, as they unsettle the monopoly of geopolitical and economic influence of Europe and North America over the continent (Mohan and Tan-Mullins, 2009). As the role of China in Africa evolves though, Chinese policies toward its diaspora in Africa as well as toward African migrations to China have been shifting, for example, with the mitigation of personal passport issuance processes and certification processes for labor service companies, as well as giving greater independence to provinces to dispatch labor (Ding, 2023). On the other hand, China has embraced the migration of African students for higher education in Chinese universities but has not removed structural barriers to their mobility in China (Mulvey, 2022).

In line with the above observations to better understand Sino-African migration, Sullivan and Cheng's (2018) study of Chinese online forums and websites where Chinese immigrants discuss life in Africa, unpacking their real daily struggles and diverse experiences, has thus focused on disaggregating the notion of "the Chinese" in Africa with a view to studying the varied experiences of Chinese migrants in different parts of Africa. These differences are shaped by a wide range of factors including provincial origin, age, occupation, or class. Similarly, Yuan and Pang (2018) argue that research on African migrants in China often overlooks the diversity of these populations, their origins, experiences, and livelihoods. They counter this oversimplification by focusing on the mobility of Congolese migrants, specifically through the lens of the Chinese concept "guoke," which means "transient guest." Effectively, both African migrants in China and Chinese migrants in Africa face significant precarity – in terms of policies and practices that regulate their legal

status, working conditions, and overall livelihoods – in their migratory trajectories even if the local contexts differ (Cissé, 2021).

There has been a distinct line of research that has focused particularly on the experiences of sub-Saharan African migrants in Guangzhou, a major port city in southeastern China, and Hong Kong pointing to the role of informal marketplaces like the Chungking Mansions in Hong Kong (Mathews, 2011) and the overall development of informal trade through African middlemen and traders particularly in those areas (Mathews, 2015a, 2015b; Mathews et al., 2017). Such research points to the socio-cultural dimensions and personalized trust relationships underpinning those economic activities and argues that this should be considered as low-end globalization because it relies mostly on personalized contacts, physical presence, and even physical carrying and shipping of the tradeable goods. It does not dispose of large capital nor formalized infrastructure that usually characterize (high-end) globalization processes (Mathews and Yang, 2012).

Looking at how this "low-end" globalization has evolved in the era of COVID-19 and omnipresent and powerful smart phones and digital platforms, Mathews (2022) points to the adaptation of these "low-end" processes to a new reality where low-value and low-volume trade takes advantage of digital technologies to develop new connections and fight old inefficiencies in supply and demand. But Mathews (2022) argues, these technological changes do not take away the importance of the personalized trust nor do they help scale up the activities to convert them into "high-end" globalization.

Our critique to this line of analysis is twofold. First, we are concerned that such research reproduces the dominant framework on international migration that presumes that "good" migration is regular, safe, and orderly as per the Global Compact for Migration mantra. Such a perspective ignores that more often than not migration happens, as in the Chungking Mansions or in the African quarters of Guangzhou, informally, irregularly, and without planning (Triandafyllidou, 2021). Sino-African migrations are not an exception to the rule but an expression of the multiple forms that international migration and human agency take. We thus need to turn our understanding upside down and recenter our understanding of globalization rather than frame these "peripheral" migrations within the dominant analytical frameworks of "low-end" and "high-end" globalization.

Second, such research has ignored the formal aspects of these activities, such as the structuring of communities of migrants without status that negotiate with the state (Olakpe, 2023); the international educational policies that have characterized Sino-African migrations (Mulvey and Mason, 2022); and the transnational circulation of information flows, which has elevated, for instance, the racist incidents registered in Guangzhou in 2020 and 2021 into a global issue (see also Oshodi in this special issue) prompting the reporting in both European and African media.

DECENTERING OUR FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING SINO-AFRICAN MIGRATIONS

This special issue seeks to build on the findings of earlier research discussed above but also to break away from dominant analytical perspectives predicated on hierarchies of low- and high-end globalization of "North" and "South" power imbalances, and of regular and unregulated migration flows. We seek to disrupt the narrative of the "good" regular migration that has become dominant, if not hegemonic, obscuring alternative perspectives and the realities of migration on the ground. The narrative of safe, orderly, and regular migration tends to unilaterally privilege the wishes and needs of destination country governments (and employers or other stakeholders) disregarding the country of origin, country of transit, and own migrant perspectives (Collet and Ahad, 2017; Mouthaan, 2019), which are particularly important for understanding why and how Sino-African migrations emerge, despite a particularly hostile and restrictive policy environment. Studying these new migrations involves questioning our West-centric understanding of international migration and its governance focused on states and international organizations. It requires paying more attention to the role of different stakeholders and actors incorporating views from the margins (Cuttitta, 2020).

Decentering at first instance makes us think about geopolitics and hence speaks about countries of origin, transit, and destination; this type of decentering may also be seen as nonsensical, or at least imperfect, as an increasing number of countries are implicated in at least two of these three roles as both origin and transit, like Ghana, or both origin and destination like Nigeria, or as all three roles together, notably as origin, transit, and destination, like, for instance, Turkey or Morocco (Triandafyllidou, 2021).

Therefore, it is important to consider multiple perspectives of decentering: decentering toward different world regions and considering the multiple directions that international flows take among different countries and continents rather than mostly toward Europe and North America. Thus, our study of Sino-African migrations requires us to consider that, for instance, Nigeria or Ghana as countries of origin of African migrations to China are also countries of destination and transit and are involved in geopolitical negotiations within the African Union or with the European Union. Adopting center-periphery logics that simply replace Europe or North America as a destination of sub-Saharan African workers or traders with China do not do justice to the dynamics and complexity of Sino-African migration flows. What we learn from Sino-African migrations is the networked and polycentric character of contemporary migration flows and the complexity of migration drivers and migration choice (Black et al., 2022; Teye et al. 2022). We are thus invited to consider those in their diversity and from multi-focal perspectives.

In this special issue, Amoah and Hodzi do this by studying the ongoing internationalization of China's higher education sector, with a focus on its impact on African migration trends and the agency of African actors in Sino-African

educational partnerships and collaborations. Their study deviates from the West-centric narrative of internationalization of higher education and instead show that it is multi-centered. They uncover the workings of internationalization shaping higher education and migration choices of young Africans on the one hand but also the asymmetries that exist in Sino-African educational cooperation as it develops.

In the same line, Oshodi (in this special issue) analyzes the West African media reporting on the treatment of Africans in Guangzhou during the pandemic. Oshodi investigates what the coverage says about transnational information flows and perceptions of Sino-African migrations in Africa. To this day, reporting on Sino-African flows has been overshadowed by Western media and shaped by their representation of China as a threat to Western dominance and norms in Africa. Oshodi's conceptualization looks at China through the lens of its domestic realities, its actions outside China, and its activities within Africa, on the one hand, and the conceptualization of China in Nigerian and Ghanaian media, on the other hand.

Decentering our perspective on migration involves also considering not only the role of states and formal policies and actors (such as governments or international organizations) but also the role of informal and personalized networks like those that are documented in the research on Sino-African migrations. Such networks characterize international migration more broadly and have been increasingly characterized as migration infrastructures (Xiang and Lindquist, 2014) that play a crucial role in international migration. Thus, a closer look into Sino-African migrations shows the importance of such networks. For instance, in this volume, Jiang uses ethnographic research to study the role of religion-based networks in helping African Muslims in Guangzhou to navigate challenges of everyday life. In these informal and personalized networks, Jiang's research highlights the business ethics of the African Muslim community, which shaped their outlook on life, their business engagements and decisions, and their experiences in China; this deviates from the focus on the impact of undocumented status, crime and illegality in the community and contributes to a more nuanced understanding of Sino-African migration and African communities in China.

Moreover, decentering enables us to elevate, unravel, and discuss aspects of Sino-African migrations that may not be evident when we adopt West-centric conceptualizations, hierarchies, and norms in the study of migration. A decentered approach also allows us to see and better understand structures that are created by Sino-African migrants and migrant communities to address the issues and challenges they face in their everyday lives. Research has shown that irregular and informal migration leads to the emergence of formal-informal community structures in migrant communities that fill the gaps and address the problems that formal laws and policies cannot (Olakpe, 2023).

In the same vein, Adebayo (in this special issue) studies communities of deported Nigerian migrants to understand how deportability and deportation experiences in China create "deportsporas" in Nigeria. In this study, Adebayo

examines how a volatile immigration law and policy environment in China and living under the constant threat of arrest and deportation shape the experiences and the entire existence of undocumented Nigerians in Guangzhou – including their family dynamics, masculinity, migratory decisions, and livelihoods.

Finally, in this special issue, Wang's ethnographic research analyses South-South cross-border marriages taking place between Chinese men and Ethiopian women. The study of Afro-Chinese marriages is relatively underexplored, particularly those occurring in the continent. Wang's research uncovers the networks, factors, and ideation that facilitate Sino-Ethiopian marriages and the outcomes that materialize as a result. Rather than use a racial or cultural lens, Wang studies the marriages within the complex context of China's expansion in Ethiopia, the socioeconomic status of Chinese and Ethiopian women, and how perceptions of China shape the migration outcomes of these cross-border unions.

These structures show the contributions that communities, regardless of their status, make to society, demonstrate their agency and their resistance to oppressive migration laws and policies shaped by the current state of the international as well as regional and domestic practices and contexts. These structures are important for several reasons. They shape both short-term and long-term migration outcomes, including individual and collective approaches to law and policy.

They also show us how migrants interpret migration policy, law, and norms as they evolve. Additionally, communal structures give us deeper insights into how and why migrants organize themselves. Lastly, they enable us to destabilize negative perceptions and understandings of these communities that have persisted in how we study Sino-African migration and migrants.

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