<https://helda.helsinki.fi>

Chinese in Africa : Chineseness and the complex

Hodzi, Obert

2019

Hodzi , O 2019 , ' Chinese in Africa : Chineseness and the complexity of
Asian Ethnicity , vol. 20 , no. 1 , pp. 1-7 . <https://doi.org/10.1080/14631369.2018.1539826>

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/275498>

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14631369.2018.1539826>

publishedVersion

Downloaded from Helda, University of Helsinki institutional repository.

This is an electronic reprint of the original article.

This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.

Please cite the original version.

Chinese in Africa: 'Chineseness' and the complexities of identities

Obert Hodzi

To cite this article: Obert Hodzi (2019) Chinese in Africa: 'Chineseness' and the complexities of identities, *Asian Ethnicity*, 20:1, 1-7, DOI: [10.1080/14631369.2018.1539826](https://doi.org/10.1080/14631369.2018.1539826)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14631369.2018.1539826>

Published online: 12 Dec 2018.

Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)

View Crossmark data [↗](#)

INTRODUCTION

Chinese in Africa: ‘Chineseness’ and the complexities of identities

Obert Hodzi

Department of Cultures, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

ABSTRACT

This introduction presents background information to a special issue exploring the complexities of the Chinese identity and forms in which ‘Chineseness’ is expressed by Chinese migrants in Africa. Existing literature and media reports on the Chinese in Africa assumes that they are a homogenous group, this introductory article argues to the contrary. The Chinese diaspora in Africa range from descendants of migrants that settled in Africa in the seventeenth century to twenty-first century migrants. This historical and contemporary engagement between China and African countries is essential to understanding the diversity and hybridity of Chinese identity in Africa. This observation provides the basis for the six articles in this special issue. Based on ethnographic observation and in-depth interviews with the Chinese diaspora and locals in Zimbabwe, Ghana, Zambia and South Africa, the articles provide a compelling argument on why there is no single Chinese identity in Africa.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 18 October 2018

Accepted 19 October 2018

KEYWORDS

Identity; Chineseness; peoples; China; Ghana; ethnicity; Ghana; Zimbabwe

Scholarship on the Chinese in Africa is expanding, but in its expansion, there is a general tendency – almost deliberate – to compound the Chinese into one homogenous group without a nuanced focus on their distinctiveness and individuality. Part of the reason is that Africa and China are taken as the overarching units of analysis, even on non-state matters, which in itself is a postcolonial error emanating from embedded perceptions of Africa and China as monolith ‘countries’. More-so, the authoritarian nature of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), and its attempts to create a single Chinese identity feeds into the ethnic and cultural homogenization of its citizens based on perceived ‘Chinese’ physiognomy. Although this is persistent, it might not be for long because there are efforts, albeit still in their infancy to question the concept of ‘Chinese’ and ‘Chineseness’ and interrogate the complexities of China’s diverse identities and ethnicity beyond the Han Chinese. The complexities are not only visible in China but also surfacing in Africa as China’s economic, political and security clout grows, and interactions between people from China and African countries take root.

Complexities of the Chinese identity in Africa

China's historical and contemporary engagement with countries in Africa provides a basis to explore complexities of the Chinese identity. This is because, beyond state-to-state relations, there are multiple identities among the 'Chinese' in Africa. They range from descendants of migrants that settled in Africa in the late seventeenth century to recent twenty-first century migrants. The result is that there are Africans of Chinese descents that identify themselves as Zimbabweans, Gabonese, South Africans, etc., more than as Chinese from the People's Republic of China. Examples of such Africans of Chinese descent include, Fay Chung, born in a third generation family of emigrants from China. She fought in Zimbabwe's liberation war, and became a cabinet minister from 1988 to 1995. Jean Ping is another notable example. Born to a Chinese father from Wenzhou, China and Gabonese mother, he is one of the most prominent Gabonese. In his illustrious political and diplomatic career, he held several positions that included African Union chairman and foreign minister of Gabon. Alongside these, are many recent migrants from the People's Republic of China settling in African countries as workers, entrepreneurs and traders among other functionalities. Without taking note of these historical dynamics, the media, scholars and politicians easily lump these different categories of people into one – the 'Chinese'.

Also bringing to the fore complexities of the Chinese identity are negative perceptions of China and its recent migrants to Africa. Narratives of China colonizing Africa, trapping Africa in debt, substandard goods, and poor workmanship by construction companies from China all feed into a subconscious collectivization of anyone and anything perceived to be associated with China as Chinese – hence 'Chinese goods', 'Chinese people', 'Chinese food', etc. These populist narratives obscure questions about who is Chinese and what constitutes 'Chineseness' – something that is also exacerbated by a notable fixation in media and existing literature on macroeconomic rather than micro-level engagements between people from China and African countries. Accordingly, the Chinese diaspora in Africa is a growing phenomenon that has rarely been studied. References, though disputed, have been made that there are a million Chinese from mainland China living and working in Africa. Questions of who these Chinese are, how they live and integrate in their local African communities have been eschewed in existing literature, and in the few cases that they have been the focus of research, they tend to be lumped up in one homogenous group – the Chinese – without a nuanced focus on their distinct histories, identities and cultures. That nuance is critical because there are varying categories of the Chinese in Africa.

Being Chinese, as is with all other identities is a hybrid identity shaped by different contexts and the diversity of individuals and groups. It is therefore fluid, its form and content is constantly changing as interactions between Chinese communities and globalization intensify. For instance, in June 2017, while conducting research on Chinese tourists in Zimbabwe, we met a Zimbabwean man of Chinese descent who did not speak Mandarin or any other Chinese dialect. He was born in Gweru, a city in Zimbabwe. As a hotel manager of one of the biggest hotels in Victoria Falls, he narrated of how the Chinese identity was imposed on him by hotel guests because he looked Chinese. Yet, to his colleagues, he is a Zimbabwean man and he considers himself to be Zimbabwean without links to China. His 'Chineseness' is therefore fluid, taking

different forms depending on how others perceive him based on their preconceived perceptions of what constitutes the 'Chinese'. How to reconcile his identity as Zimbabwean vis-a-vis the externally imposed Chinese identity reflects the agency of diverse actors, which makes the Chinese identity complex – forcing these Africans with Chinese physiognomy to live in between and assume several identities, some of them externally imposed, depending on whom they interact with.

As authors in this special issue grapple with the question of what constitutes the Chinese and Chineseness, they seem to agree that there is no fixed Chinese identity. In examining how recent immigrants from China negotiate their identity and existence in Ghana, Zimbabwe and other African countries they challenge the current homogenization of the Chinese in Africa, which is prevalent in existing literature and media reports on China-Africa engagement. Not being homogenous, the identity of Chinese in Africa and expression of their Chineseness is defined and shaped by their interests and reasons for which they find themselves in particular places on the African continent. That means, even in one country, there are multiple Chinese identities regardless of whether the Chinese people in question are from the same province in China. That fluidity, trans-ethnic and transnational identity is the nuance that has been hinted in this issue but still requires further in-depth research.

Insights on construction and deconstruction of Chinese identities

This special issue provides several insights into what explains the complexities of the Chinese identity. The first insight is that micro-level rather than macro-level engagements as focuses of analysis are more critical to understanding the complexities of the Chinese identity. The authors argue that homogenization of the 'Chinese' identity on the basis of bilateral engagements between China and African countries clouds the historical, cultural and ethnicity that influences the diverse forms of Chinese identity. Gukurume observe in his contribution to this issue that 'there is hardly any study in Zimbabwe that explores the micro politics of everyday life and interactions between Chinese small-scale traders and their workers and clients.'¹ Dankwah and Amoah make a similar observation arguing that studies on China-Africa 'have focused on China's macro level engagement with the continent and its countries.'² It therefore follows that to understand the complexities of the Chinese identity, a departure from the macro-level engagements should be the starting point because rather than states, the people, both from China and African countries exercise agency in constructing and deconstructing their identities and what it means to be Chinese depending on their interests and perceptions.

The second insight is that relations between Chinese migrants in Africa and the Africans create new forms of Chineseness and reframe the Chinese identity. This is because as the Chinese from China interact and engage with Africans, their Chineseness is impacted by the reactions and dispositions of local populations. Those reactions and dispositions are in turn shaped by the nature of interaction and the spaces in which those interactions occur. Apart from marriages between recent Chinese immigrants and Africans, the majority of interactions occur in the marketplace and workplace. How each of the two groups behave and interact with each other in those spaces contribute to formation of new identities and reinforcement of past ones. In particular, for traders, the

competitive environments that the Chinese migrants find themselves in are shaping how they articulate their identity – reinforcing perceptions that the Chinese are shrewd traders. This is compounded by segregation in urban and market spaces as is the case in Ghana – the designation of certain market spaces as Chinese motivates formation of new identities. The Chinese traders become what they trade more than how they identify themselves.

The incompatibility of Chinese and local trading practices in Ghana, Zimbabwe, Zambia and South Africa as reflected in this issue's articles is also contributing to the dismantling of Chinese immigrants' ethnic identities. For locals competing with the Chinese traders, mostly recent immigrants, it does not matter that they are Uighur or Han, or that they are from Hong Kong or Taiwan – they are simply referred to as the Chinese who are taking over business from locals. What makes identities of the Chinese and the interpretation of what constitutes Chineseness enduring is that the 'us and them' dichotomy feeds into stereotypes already in the public domain and perpetrated by local and international media reports. The Chinese in Africa are therefore in a constant struggle to articulate, re-articulate and reframe their identity and Chineseness – adjusting and negotiating elements of their identity to secure their spaces and ensure their survival.

The final insight from this issue is that the pervasive mutual fear and mistrust between locals and Chinese immigrants, particularly in trade and business influence how the Chinese identify with their country of residence. Not able to engage fully in local communities due to both real and imagined structural and social incompatibilities, Chinese traders often expatriate their profits back to China. In Zimbabwe this has been used by political leaders to incite mistrust against the Chinese by labelling them disloyal and ungrateful. The implication is that the Chinese communities in several African countries are as put by Dankwah and Amoah are 'in a constant state of flux and maintain loose social bonds... Chinese migrants experience an in-betweenness and struggle with notions of belonging.'³ They seem to be in a constant state of transiting. As put by Yan, Sautman and Yao,⁴ they are in a state of indeterminacy – they do not intend to stay permanently even though some end up doing so. The result is that they are adapting to local communities but not integrating.

To negotiate those imperils of mistrust, cultivate their own social capital and create safe social and business spaces, Chinese immigrants are literally and figuratively creating enclosures of Chineseness in which they are safe to be Chinese. Exclusive Chinese restaurants, China towns and Chinese shopping centers in Harare, Johannesburg and Accra are emerging as places that resemble the Chinese migrants' attempt to establish their own identity as the Chinese islands in Africa. They have become spaces in which being Chinese is understood – 'it is in these spaces that the Chinese traders claim social space and struggle to forge a sense of belonging.'⁵ The spaces are as the proverbial – home away from home. The unintended effect is that as these spaces become safe Chinese spaces they simultaneously fuel the suspicions and mistrust that locals and their ruling elites have regarding the 'Chinese'. The Chinese are therefore in a perpetual state of negotiating and renegotiating their identity with the locals.

Paper summaries

Articles in this special issue focus on recent migrants from China, and almost all of them are based on ethnographic observation and in-depth interviews with Chinese

migrants and locals. Jinpu Wang, in 'Nationalism and the Overseas Chinese State, and the Construction of "Chineseness" among Chinese Migrant Entrepreneurs in Ghana' explores how nationalism is expressed by Chinese entrepreneurs in Ghana and how that influences their identity. The pith of the article is that the Chinese identity and Chineseness is located at the intersection of identity formation of migrant groups, the role of migrant-sending states in international migration and the discussion of nationalism and national identity in an area intensified by globalisation. They argue that the concept of 'Chineseness' is a fluid cultural and national identity – at the core of the argument is what role does the Chinese state play in constructing and renewing Chineseness of migrant Chinese entrepreneurs in Ghana. Wang argues that the People's Republic of China plays a critical role in constructing the Chinese identity such that being Chinese is 'a constant adjustment of one's cultural and political identity during interactions with the state.' But, what happens when the Chinese in Africa have minimal or non-existent interaction with the PRC is minimal or non-existent. What then shapes their identity abroad? Wang argues that the de-territorial nature of Chinese nationalism – recent migrants from China retain a continued sense of Chineseness and are 'characterised by their sentimental attachment to, and affinity with the rising Chinese nation-state and its modernization project.'⁶ Chinese in the diaspora therefore 'construct an essentialist notion of Chinese identity in order to reconcile their sense of displacement, multiplicity, and fragmentation in real life.'⁷

Departing from the existing studies fixation with macroeconomic implications of Chinese engagements with Africa, Dankwah and Amoah focus on the dispositions and attitudes of Ghanaian traders toward Chinese traders. The take home is that the formation of the Chinese identity among Chinese migrant traders in Ghana is shaped by the local social, economic and political contexts they encounter. This is further complicated by their observation that the Chinese migrants in Ghana include temporary contracted labor migrants, proletarian migrants in transit to Europe and other destination outside of Africa and entrepreneurial migrants who are there for the long-haul. The distinctions between these groups are however fluid because some come for one purpose and end up staying for a different purpose.

Gukurume takes an anthropological look at how Chinese migrant traders in Harare, Zimbabwe utilize urban spaces – not just as places of residence but as places of recreation and business; and how they are socially and spatially segregated from the locals. He notes the emerging socialites and relationships being forged between the Chinese migrant traders, their workers and clients. He theorizes that Chinese traders are developing 'unique forms of Chineseness emerge akin to what the scholars referred to as 'tactical cosmopolitanism.'⁸ He succinctly argues that Chinese mobility is reconfiguring the making of Chinese identities in Harare. What is interesting from Gukurume's article is the complexity that while Zimbabweans are leaving the country for lack of job and business opportunities, flows of Chinese migrants to Zimbabwe are increasing. The logical question is what are they seeing that locals are not seeing? How does that shape the Chinese migrant traders' relations with the locals? It is interesting that the answer is the same in Zimbabwe and Ghana. Dankwah and Amoah's explanation that where there are more opportunities and interaction there is likely to be less hostility, may explain relations between the Chinese and locals.

To the contrary, Yan, Sautman and Yao in 'Chinese and self-segregation in Africa' they argue that Chinese in Africa are not self-segregatory. They bring out the state (Chinese embassies) and company imposed constraints on Chinese workers in Africa that impede their integration. But more importantly, they bring out a strong point about the fluidity of Chinese status and identity in Africa – shifting from experts to migrant traders and farmers and vice-versa. What comes out clearly from their paper is that the purpose of coming to Africa, type of firm, nature of business and the length of stay determine how integrated the Chinese become. They conclude that for the Chinese, self-segregation is non-volitional and is a reflection of their perpetual state of living in between – which inhibits them from totally integrating in local communities. Wang Zhihang, in 'Understanding Chinese Immigrants in Africa: From the Perspective of National Identity' takes a contrasting view from Yan, Sautman and Yao. She argues that Chinese migrants in Africa self-isolate. She however argues that while they self-isolate from local people, they endear themselves to local elites for survival and material interests. They are pragmatic in their integration in local communities.

The final article in the issue explores the concept of country-of-origin of products and the effect it has on traders from the countries where the product originate. In his article, 'Rational or Irrational? Understanding the Uptake of 'Made-in-China' Products' Obeng explores how the Chinese identity is linked to perceptions of products from China by Ghanians. He argues that in making sense of the 'Made-in-China products, stereotypes that Chinese products are of inferior quality and patronized by the poor are increasingly being dismantled. The implication of Obeng's argument is that the country-of-origin of products has an effect on the identity of traders in those products. Obeng's approach is novel in the study of identities and provides a basis for further exploration on the interlink between quality of products and the identity of people from where the products originate. This is of particular importance to African countries where products from China compete with products from Europe and the United States, which are considered to be of superior quality.

Notes

1. Gukurume, "Chinese Migrants and the Politics."
2. Dankwah and Amoah, "Gauging the Dispositions between Indigenes."
3. Ibid.
4. Yan et al., "Chinese and Self-Segregation in Africa."
5. See above note 1.
6. Wang, "Nationalism and the Overseas Chinese State."
7. Ibid.
8. Gukurume, "Chinese Migrants and the Politics of Everyday Life in Zimbabwe."

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Obert Hodzi is a postdoctoral researcher in the Department of Cultures at the University of Helsinki, Finland. His research interests involve global governance, security, south-south power dynamics and politics in Africa.

Bibliography

- Dankwah, K. O., and P. A. Amoah. "Gauging the Dispositions between Indigenes, Chinese and Other Immigrant Traders in Ghana: Towards a More Inclusive Society." *Asian Ethnicity* 20, no. 1 (2019): 1–18. doi:[10.1080/14631369.2018.1490173](https://doi.org/10.1080/14631369.2018.1490173).
- Gukurume, S. "Chinese Migrants and the Politics of Everyday Life in Zimbabwe." *Asian Ethnicity* 20, no. 1 (2019): 1–18. doi:[10.1080/14631369.2018.1490174](https://doi.org/10.1080/14631369.2018.1490174).
- Wang, J. "Nationalism and the Overseas Chinese State, and the Construction of 'Chineseness' among Chinese Migrant Entrepreneurs in Ghana." *Asian Ethnicity* 20, no. 1 (forthcoming).
- Yan, H., B. Sautman, and L. Yao. "Chinese and 'Self-Segregation' in Africa." *Asian Ethnicity* 20, no. 1 (2019): 1–27. doi:[10.1080/14631369.2018.1511370](https://doi.org/10.1080/14631369.2018.1511370).