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Frontispiece:

A girl from the minority Yazidi sect, fleeing the violence of the ISIS in the Iraqi town of Sinjar, rests at the Iraqi-Syrian border in Fishkhabour, Dohuk province August 13, 2014. REUTERS/Youssef Boudlal/File Photo – stock.adobe.com

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Africans in China: The Migration-Related Consequences of China's "African Policy"

István Tarrósy

Abstract

This paper seeks to reflect upon China's "African Policy" from the perspective of both inbound and outbound migration. In particular, it offers an overview of contemporary narratives via academic literature pieces, coupled with the results of ongoing field research conducted since 2012. It addresses such issues – still under-researched – as African student mobility to China, yet another direct consequence of an accentuated and complex policy towards the African continent. All will be looked at finally through the lens of the ongoing global COVID-19 pandemic, which has brought up a possible 'crack' in the firm collaborative framework in the form of several atrocities against African migrants in Chinese cities.

Keywords: China–Africa relations, African migration, Africans in China, mobility of African students, COVID-19

1. Introduction¹

The international system has been changing as far as relations of its players are concerned: we are witnessing more nuanced and complex scenarios and behaviours, behind which realism still matters and pragmatism – as the norm of the national interest – drives the foreign policies of governments all across the globe. In terms of power, in recent times, the rise of emerging actors has caught the attention of numerous scholars and policymakers. Although the USA is no longer a hegemon, it is still by far the world's most powerful state. However, from an economic-financial point of view in particular, the USA is certainly not the only 'super influence', as long as it is rivalled by the second largest economy in the world, a continuously rising China.² In addition, the European Union as a grouping of 27 member states with all its internal challenges as well as potential, together with Japan, Brazil, Russia, India, or regional middle powers such as Turkey, Indonesia

¹ This introductory part draws upon TARRÓSY 2017 and the paper presentation the author gave at the "The Migration Conference" (TCM) on June 28th, 2018, in Lisbon, Portugal.

² See among others: ERDEINÉ KÉSMÁRKI-GALLY – NESZMÉLYI 2018.

and Iran, possess major capabilities and strengths.³ All of them would surely prefer a more multipolar scenario, with more centres of gravity.

Since Deng Xiaoping's policy of opening at the end of the 1970s China has become more assertive on the international stage. First of all, it has proven to the world that it can develop its capacities to learn and adapt, as well as following a pragmatic foreign policy, which reflects how flexible China can be in the management of its relations across the globe. China has been diligent in developing an understanding of both the external context and its internal set of issues to deal with in the long run. Strategic thinking about both has always been embedded in Chinese policymaking, to "*defend national development interests while also maintaining openness to the outside world*,"⁴ as former president Hu Jintao said. China has been steadily ascending, but among many competitors, not in a vacuum. Although it is still not clearly apparent whether or not this rise will be of an 'alternative or even rival order' driven by China, the 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI) strategy, proposed by President Xi Jinping in 2013, demonstrates a clear Chinese intention to return to great power status.

With regard to Africa, China has already firmly surpassed the US in trade terms, and years ago overtook America as the world's largest net importer of oil,⁵ a huge part of which comes from Africa. As Zoltán Vörös highlights, "*China has come to occupy a particularly prominent position [...] in Africa. It is part of the new forces that help shape the continent*."⁶ But it is a myth to state that it is only the natural resources that matter for China. Chinese-African linkages have been broadened, with a heavy focus on business. China is less interested in the aid industry as a policy approach (though it also operates foreign aid type of activities), but rather focuses on business, which – if managed well enough, strategically speaking, on the African side – can be mutually productive. Beijing's pragmatism uses many tactics to win the hearts and minds of its collaborating partners. As Harry Verhoeven underlines, the so-called sacred Chinese foreign policy notion of non-intervention has become "*a tactical tool rather than a deeply held value*."⁷ As part of its 'charm offensive'⁸, there have been a widening range of activities deployed so that China can come up with the best offer. Package deals are promoted by the Chinese government's foreign policy machinery, which includes supporting

³ See among others: PÁSZTOR 2020.

⁴ HU 2012.

⁵ THE ECONOMIST 2013.

⁶ VÖRÖS 2011, p 33.

⁷ VERHOEVEN 2014, p 67.

⁸ See: KURLANTZICK 2007.

higher education through scholarships⁹ and assistance projects – for instance, to African universities –, installing Confucius Institutes (and/or classrooms) with Chinese language teachers, textbooks, cultural programs, summer camps for kids, together with building infrastructure (roads, hospitals, schools) and encouraging the trade of Chinese goods. All the hard and soft approaches to power are woven into a comprehensive Africa policy, which helps China's accelerated and growing engagement with the continent. The policy is made increasingly visible in the form of the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) – the triennial summit held since 2000 – and its efficient diplomatic machinery. As a direct consequences of this highly convincing policy framework, there has been a penetration of Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) across the continent, together with rising inbound individual migration from China. In his eminent volume *China's Second Continent*, Howard W. French shows the faces of Chinese pragmatism in the everyday context of African realities. His intention is to go against the oft-depicted, overly simplistic view of “China in Africa” dynamics. In the Sino-Zambian context, for instance, French reveals what China's migrants consider when making their decisions to travel to Africa: “*This is a good time to be in Africa*” because of the “*fabulous new markets [...] a lot of new mouths to be fed, lots more people to be clothed, devices and appliances and goods of all kinds to be sold.*”¹⁰ Africa is full of abundant opportunities, especially for many Chinese of the “lost generation” of the Cultural Revolution. Yet another direct consequence of China's accentuated Africa policy is the expanding outbound migration of Africans to China. As Castles et al. underscore: “*African migrants are also increasingly attracted to fast-growing economies beyond the traditional destinations in Europe [...] Migration from Africa to China has been growing fast.*”¹¹

Within the Sino-African realm of relations and the context of global African migrations, the aim of this paper is to draw attention to the relatively small, but intensively developing African migration to China – running parallel to the already visible Chinese migration to the various different corners of the African continent.¹² In the next part, relevant tendencies and ongoing dynamics will be explored via a review of contemporary literature. Emphasis will then be laid on young Africans studying at Chinese universities, together with the decision of many to become economic migrants in the Chinese trading sector. The analysis will be supported by evidence from the field, which covers ongoing research projects by the author

⁹ VÖRÖS 2010, p 147.

¹⁰ FRENCH 2014, p 44.

¹¹ CASTLES ET AL. 2014, p 188.

¹² According to France24: “*Recent estimates put the number of Chinese citizens currently residing in Africa at one million while some 200,000 Africans live and work in China.*”

in different cities of China and certain Sub-Saharan African countries including Tanzania, Kenya, Rwanda and Ethiopia since 2011. Finally, before the concluding thoughts, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic with regard to Chinese-African relations will be considered.

2. Who gains what? A literature review

Since the launch of FOCAC as one of the central tools of China's African engagement, growing attention on all levels has been recorded from China towards Africa. More closely, since 2006 when the Chinese government declared "The Year of Africa" and published its "African Policy"¹³, all forms of cooperation have been unfolding in front of the eyes of the international community. Soft items – such as education, training and human resources development – have been closely knitted into the obviously hard power-focused Chinese involvement in the trading, investment and extraction sectors. Among China's many commitments, announced in its government documents, as King points out, the Chinese "*pledge to examine what are Africa's own priority needs [...] [and] China's education support will to some extent be demand-driven, a response to Africa's own priorities.*"¹⁴ This approach is originally from Japan, and for a long time it has determined the island nation's links with African actors in terms of international cooperation. As French emphasizes, however: "*One of the most important and unpredictable factors in China's relationship with Africa [...] has been oddly omitted from most of the discussions: China's export, in effect, of large numbers of its own people who are settling in as migrants and long-term residents in far-flung and hitherto unfamiliar parts of the continent.*"¹⁵ In recent years, more and more sound academic studies have addressed the issue of migration as yet another important dimension of China-Africa relations. These add significant knowledge to the already extensive literature on "China in Africa" mainly from economic, trade, security, or investment perspectives, dealing mostly with Beijing's expansion and "rise" on the continent.¹⁶ From the global rise angle, and drawing upon Brautigam's seminal research, we are also more familiar today with foreign aid as a part of the Chinese toolkit.¹⁷ Thanks to a growing circle of scholars, for over a decade it has been possible to draw a more detailed picture of African

¹³ MOFA 2006.

¹⁴ KING 2013, p 2.

¹⁵ FRENCH 2014, p 5.

¹⁶ MICHEL – BEURET 2009; ALDEN 2007; ALDEN ET AL. 2008; TAYLOR 2006; CHERU – OBI 2010; ROTBERG 2008 AND SHINN – EISENMANN 2012.

¹⁷ BRAUTIGAM 2009.

perspectives on China in Africa, too.¹⁸ From a geostrategic point of view, Africa has been elevated to a more cautious level for basically all the emerging actors of the semi-periphery as well as those in the core.¹⁹ China's heavier presence across Africa has also resulted in "*Africans becoming 'sellers', 'buyers' or 'contractors' in its economic relations with China, in which Africa becomes an active decision-maker rather than a passive decision-receiver.*"²⁰ There is wide agreement that Africa has arrived at a critical juncture with potential for the rise of 'African agency', possessing the aforementioned decision-making power for itself. As we read in French's book quoting senior Ghanaian think tank executive Ed Brown: the relationship with China "*is going to determine Africa's future for the next fifty years. The big question is whether African countries are dynamic enough to take advantage, or whether they'll end up being the appendage of somebody else all over again.*"²¹ Despite convincing-sounding claims about the transfer of technologies to the Africans by Chinese company personnel, as Liu critically examines, "*not much has improved for Africans. Cheap Chinese labour is still flooding the African market.*"²² The entire picture of the benefits any of the parties can gain is therefore rather complicated. In addition to the dominant actors, in the form of state-owned companies (SOEs), we can see that "*reality is more meaningfully shaped by the deeds of countless smaller actors,*" which will shed light on "*each of China's new immigrants to Africa [as] an architect helping to shape this momentous new relationship.*"²³ China's people-to-people (P2P) approach is even more accentuated in its Second Africa Policy paper from 2015, which emphasizes the role of education and training: "*China will help train more much-needed professionals for African countries, in particular, teachers and medical workers. While enhancing exchanges and cooperation between education administration agencies and institutions on both sides, China will continue to implement the 'African Talents Program', gradually increase the number of government scholarships for applicants in African countries, and encourage local governments, institutions of higher learning, enterprises and social organizations to set up scholarships. It welcomes more African young people to study in China, encouraging and supporting them to play a bigger role in the pragmatic cooperation between China and Africa.*"²⁴ This renewed step undoubtedly confirms the flow of Chinese into African countries, as well as encouraging the flow of Africans into China: once again, raising awareness about a more dynamically developing setting of intercontinental migration. Although

¹⁸ MANJI – MARKS 2007.

¹⁹ See, for example: PÁSZTOR 2019.

²⁰ XING 2016, p 91.

²¹ FRENCH 2014, p 8.

²² LIU 2018, p 87.

²³ FRENCH 2014, p 5.

²⁴ MOFA 2015.

an expanding literature recognises the mobility of people in both directions in the large Sino-African context, Liu is right in saying that: “*The study of migrant flows between China and Africa has also yet to be incorporated into the study of international relations on bilateral relations.*”²⁵

It is unanimously reported that “*African migrants are increasingly attracted to fast-growing economies beyond the traditional destinations in Europe [...] Some Africans have gone as far afield as Russia, Turkey, Japan, India and China, and even Brazil and Argentina in search of work, education and business opportunities.*”²⁶ Overall “*migration from Africa to China has been growing fast,*” and after the initial wave of Africans travelling with a study purpose “*since 2000, growing numbers of West African (particularly Nigerian and Ghanaian) traders have been reported in China. [...] The increase of African immigration accelerated after China’s accession to membership of the World Trade Organization in 2001. [...] Most Africans are concentrated in Guangdong [province].*”²⁷

As Zhou et al. observes, “*Africans in China are predominantly self-made entrepreneurs doing business face-to-face with Chinese entrepreneurs and living among local Chinese residents.*”²⁸ They talk about the ambivalent attitudes of the locals towards African migrants, which is also highlighted in Liang and Le Billon’s research looking at the prevalent features of encounters. Liang and Le Billon conducted fieldwork in Guangzhou and, in contrast to Bodomo’s²⁹ view of these African migrants acting as cultural bridges, building up a context of mutual comprehension and appreciation, they underscore an “*antagonism against Africans [stemming] from the racialized representations amalgamated with both the traditional Sino-centric discourses of barbarians and Western-style racial hierarchy.*”³⁰ Amidst all these contrasting scenes, which we will see intensifying under the pressures of the global COVID-19 pandemic, Castillo investigates China as “the new land of opportunities” for Africans, together with “*African communities and organisations (‘networks of support’) [facilitating] place-making processes and [enhancing] the development of structures of belonging, which are central to the production of identities and the articulation of [...] feelings of ‘at-homeness’ amongst Africans in the city.*”³¹

²⁵ LIU 2018, p 81.

²⁶ CASTLES ET AL. 2014, p 188., and see also: FLAHAUX – DE HAAS 2016, p 18.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ ZHOU ET AL. 2016, p 141.

²⁹ BODOMO – MA 2010.

³⁰ LIANG – LE BILLON 2018, p 22.

³¹ CASTILLO 2014, p 236.

3. Yiwu as emerging hub of African migration to China

The City of Yiwu in Zhejiang province is located around 250 km west of Shanghai, and for over the last ten to fifteen years it has become one of the world's largest commodities markets. In fact, the entire city can be imagined as a massive “plaza of commodities”, where there is nothing one cannot buy – the question, obviously, is quantity: how many crates of toy pandas, for instance, do you want to purchase? After Guangzhou and other more (formerly) traditional destinations for Africans to foster trade in and with China – e.g. Hong Kong, Macau, Beijing – it is Yiwu which has grabbed the attention of the world, and has also grown into a sub-centre of gravity in Afro-Asian relations from a geo-economic perspective. As Bodomo–Ma describe it: *“Most of the Africans in Yiwu are traders, with their lives revolving around the commodities market located on ChouZhou Bei Lu (ChouZhou North Road).”*³² Based on our field research³³ in the city from 2012 and 2015 we also confirm Bodomo–Ma’s arguments that *“the African community in Yiwu is living more harmoniously with its Chinese hosts, than the African community in Guangzhou.”*³⁴ Undoubtedly, since its opening at the end of the 1970s, China has increased capacities and worked out solutions enabling its rise in global terms. From a migration point of view, and staying within our context of Sino-African relations, Cissé is right in saying that: *“China has thus become the new ‘locus’ of the African diaspora. While trade ties have existed between African countries, Europe and the United States for a considerable period of time, today new trade networks have developed between Africa and China and expanded in Chinese and African cities due to growing economic relations between China and African countries. China’s modernisation and openness to becoming an economic immigration destination have helped hasten this process.”*³⁵ The mentioned Chinese cities, including Yiwu, have become places of “translocality”, a complex of localities (in plural), incorporating *“both spatial dimensions: the emplacement and the mobility or flow through places.”*³⁶

During our fieldtrips we learnt about the conditions the city of Yiwu provided for inbound migrants with business purposes, mostly from the Gulf Region and African countries. Yiwu’s International Trade Centre offers office space for African businesses (when it was launched more than ten years ago, the first couple of years were rent-free) and dedicates a special quarter for such shops in the ‘Africa Centre’.

³² BODOMO – MA 2010, p 284.

³³ The author carried out these research projects together with Zoltán VÖRÖS, University of Pécs.

³⁴ *Ibid.* p 288.

³⁵ CISSÉ 2015, p 45.

³⁶ GILLES 2015, p 24.

Our respondents confirmed that the City of Yiwu made it easier for Africans to obtain a visa, thus more easily boosting the volume of traders from various corners of the African continent, as well as the Middle East. Many joint ventures also came into being, with Chinese ownership, in most cases, but run by Africans. The dynamically developing Sino-African migration flows – inbound as much as outbound – have embraced business, with the trade of African products, including ebony in particular, but timber in general, as well as precious stones such as Tanzanite, together with clothing and traditional jewelry. Made in China products on the other end of the spectrum are traded back to Africa by an increasingly large number of African traders, who can get good deals in Yiwu and all other such hubs in China.

As early as 2012, in the Ethiopian shop operated by a young businesswoman from Addis Ababa, we were told that the Chinese market can easily absorb ebony-made products, and she explained in detail how Chinese people love the buddha statues carved out of Ethiopian timber³⁷ – what an example of Afro-Asian ‘encounters’! When back in Yiwu in the summer of 2015, another round of interviews were recorded with Ethiopian, Sudanese, Ghanaian, Gambian and Senegalese traders. Frank from Ghana emphasized that despite the slowdown he had experienced in his venture, it still seemed promising that the Chinese government encouraged bilateral trade, so he remained positive about the expected benefits.³⁸ Although he had not had previous studies in Mandarin, he could communicate well enough with his Chinese customers.

African migrants are also more and more self-confident about localizing themselves in the daily linguistic realities of the destination country of their migratory decision, therefore, if possible, they are attempting to master Mandarin, too. As Fahrion reports about the African diaspora in “Little Africa” in Guangzhou, and telling the story of Tabou Diop from Senegal, in particular, we learn that: “*Having studied [the language] for three years at the Guangdong University of Technology, Diop speaks [it] fluently.*”³⁹ There are also the “agents, or ‘fixers’, some of whom speak fluent Mandarin, who negotiate deals for their fellow Africans.”⁴⁰ So long as China consistently proclaimed itself open for business, “*many migrants no longer only view the United States and Europe, but also China, as lands of opportunity.*”⁴¹ In a continent

³⁷ Interview with the Ethiopian shop owner in Yiwu (she asked not to mention her name) on April 4th, 2012.

³⁸ Interview with Frank (Ghanian shop owner) in Yiwu on August 29th, 2015.

³⁹ FAHRION 2019.

⁴⁰ MATHEWS 2011, p 62.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

where there are abundant opportunities as well as mounting challenges – especially during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic – such new engagements are of prime importance. A 2019 UNDP report underlines, as Fox summarizes, that “*migration is a reverberation of uneven development and particularly of a development trajectory that is failing young people.*”⁴² As opposed to still prevailing practices of uneven trade, “*the relationship between Africa and the rest of the world has to be more holistic in that it cannot be deducted solely to aid. It needs to be an equal partnership which involves looking at a host of other issues like trade.*”⁴³ All these are of heightened significance when the “*transformation of climate [especially hits] the African continent, which suffers the heaviest consequences of climate change.*”⁴⁴

4. African educational migration to Chinese universities

Another visibly unfolding reality of China–Africa relations has to be addressed, particularly as it is still under-researched: African student mobility to China. As Hodzi also underlines: “*Africans, with or without support of their governments are looking for better education beyond the continent and traditional destinations such as France, the UK and the United States. They are looking toward China.*”⁴⁵ China, together with other emerging economies including Turkey, India, or Brazil, concentrates a large chunk of its “*support for education and training in Africa at the higher education level.*”⁴⁶ This, then, results in a massively growing number of young African people studying at Chinese universities. According to the CSIS China Power Project, also acknowledging data limitations, the number of African students in China grew from less than 1,800 in 2003 to over 60,000 in 2016. “*The greatest number of these students came from Ghana (5,552 students), Nigeria (4,746), and Tanzania (3,520).*”⁴⁷ The FOCAC machinery plays a key role in attracting these young Africans, with its core message already echoed at the FOCAC III in Beijing, about the “*increase in government scholarships from 2,000 awards in 2006 to 4,000 awards by 2009, and to a total of 6,000 by 2015. [Together with] a similar commitment for short-term training of African professionals from 10,000 to 30,000 in total over that same period from 2006 to 2015.*”⁴⁸ As Breeze and Moore point out, with these numbers, after France, China has become “*the second most popular*

⁴² FOX 2019.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ MARSAL 2020, p 116.

⁴⁵ HODZI 2020, p 567.

⁴⁶ KING 2013, p 29.

⁴⁷ CSIS 2020.

⁴⁸ KING 2013, p 69.

*destination for African students studying abroad.*⁴⁹ As long as “*China is comparatively well positioned to attract African students due to moderate tuitions fees, low living costs and welcoming visa policies, as compared to most Western destinations,*”⁵⁰ more than half of the total African student population at Chinese universities are self-funded, which also resembles a developing African middle class at home being able to finance the tertiary education of young family members outside of their respective countries.⁵¹ As a consequence of the heavy internationalization of Chinese universities, incentivized by the government, incoming African students can also choose from a broadening portfolio of English-taught degree programmes, in addition to the Mandarin-taught ones that had been available from the 1960s onwards.

During our fieldtrips in 2012, 2015 and 2019, while talking with African students at the five universities we visited (i.e. at Zhejiang Normal University (ZNU), Shanghai Institute of Technology (SIT), Hangzhou Normal University (HNU), University of Electronic Science and Technology of China (UESTC), and Nanjing Audit University (NAU)), we became convinced about the prospects China had been advertising and offering as part of its ‘charm offensive’ related to its soft power, which all our interviewees confirmed. They talked about their intention to return to their home countries with valuable and competitive degrees and a deep(er) understanding of Chinese people, and in possession of the necessary linguistic skills to foster long-term cooperation with China. A female student from Cameroon in Jinhua, for instance, explained to me that she wanted to return and work for either her government or a Chinese company, or any joint venture, as an interpreter who can utilize her fluent Mandarin in arranging businesses between the two countries. Peter from Kenya came to study international trade at ZNU, and after spending three years in China he spoke fluent Chinese, the acquisition of which was tremendously helped by the fact that he had a local Chinese girlfriend he was living together with off-campus.⁵² Fifth-year medical students from Ethiopia and Somaliland at HNU underscored their firm belief that by returning to their home countries they would be able to contribute to developing their societies and economies, including by using their connections with China. In fact, they said that they would be more competitive on the job market with their Chinese

⁴⁹ BREEZE – MOORE 2017.

⁵⁰ HAUGEN 2013, p 316.

⁵¹ This is also confirmed by HODZI 2020, p 573. mentioning also the quality of the programmes as important selling point for attracting students.

⁵² Interviews were recorded on 28 August, 2015, in Jinhua.

degrees.⁵³ In June 2019, more interviews were recorded⁵⁴ with adult learners who were sent to earn a Master's degree in auditing from NAU – their respective governments financed their studies to get additional professional training from the English-taught programme of NAU. From all of these discussions, we could conclude what Ho mentioned earlier: “*The African students move to China not only for acquiring Chinese educational credentials, but also to enhance the household's economic prospects by leveraging on growing geopolitical and geo-economic ties between China and Africa. They seek to accumulate cultural capital derived from the Chinese urban experience that together with a Chinese university degree would make oneself stand out in the country of origin or if they develop careers in a third country.*”⁵⁵

5. Changing relations in the COVID-19 pandemic context?

At the core of its Africa policy, China has always emphasized the importance of the people-to-people (P2P) dimension of all its engagements across the African continent since the launch of the FOCAC in 2000. While in general the Chinese ‘charm offensive’ has successfully reached out to publics at large, an increasing number of anti-Chinese sentiments have been reported in different African countries, in particular connected to ongoing large-scale (mostly transport) infrastructure investment schemes. As I wrote earlier about the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and such cases in East Africa, “*among the multiple local views towards increasing Chinese presence [across Africa], there is a growing resistance in some localities [...] and the execution of the BRI has made inadequate provisions for the management of local resistance and fears.*”⁵⁶ The COVID-19 pandemic has added yet another challenge in the form of xenophobic behaviour: atrocities against Africans in China, and more negative attitudes towards Chinese living in African countries. In such turbulent and disturbing times it is always the “other” who is to be blamed.

This is precisely what happened regarding the maltreatment of Africans in the City of Guangzhou in April 2020. As “*local authorities identified Africa as the source of the largest number of imported COVID-19 cases [...] Africans have become*

⁵³ Focus group meeting held on 26 August, 2015, in Hangzhou.

⁵⁴ Interviews were recorded on 3 June, 2019, in Nanjing.

⁵⁵ Ho 2017, p 17. This view is reaffirmed by Breeze and Moore when they say that most of the African students appreciated the trade and other business opportunities their Chinese education made available to them when they returned to their home countries. See: BREEZE – MOORE 2017.

⁵⁶ TARRÓSY 2019, p 170.

a top target of Chinese quarantine efforts.”⁵⁷ “Many Africans, including students, were evicted from their houses and hotel rooms (without prior notice which has effectively left many of them homeless) and denied entrance into commercial venues.”⁵⁸ Apparently, a spiralling campaign of discrimination soon became tangible in the city, which had experienced the build-up of “Little Africa” in the past, and it is no surprise that “the potential for cultural conflict exists and materializes in certain situations, such as negative media reporting about lifestyle differences, public health hazards, and social problems.”⁵⁹ Many say that implicit racism against people with different skin colour, that is black people, is not novel and “had been observed long before the COVID-19 crisis. However, COVID-19 has brought this tension to new levels.”⁶⁰

Numerous questions can be formulated in the wake of the abovementioned incidents: How far and in what ways will the pandemic affect (harm) Sino-African relations in their daily realities? How can governments and states themselves handle an even larger possible distancing between the cooperation partners? To what extent can local and national media contribute to either easing the tension, or just the opposite, stir emotions further? How strong is ‘African agency’ when it comes to criticizing China and therefore demonstrating its power to protect the interests of its countries and peoples? Or, as Castillo and Amoah ask: “*Is this the end of African migration to China as we know it?*”⁶¹

On 17 June, Chinese President Xi Jinping hosted a virtual ‘Extraordinary China–Africa Summit on Solidarity Against COVID-19’ with African leaders. As Van Staden reports: “*Xi did not issue an apology for early April’s events in Guangzhou [but] did say: ‘We oppose politicisation and stigmatisation of COVID-19 and we oppose racial discrimination and ideological bias.’*”⁶²

It is hard to state that everything is back to normal, as the pandemic still presents substantial challenges for the African continent – (seemingly) less so for China. The Chinese narrative over COVID-19 and its demonstrated solidarity with African countries are in line with China’s rise to global leading status. As Vaidyanathan explains, “*China seeks to emerge from this crisis as a leader of global health – promising funds and assistance to WHO as President Trump threatens to curtail both.*”⁶³ It is, first of all, in China’s interest to normalize the situation with Africa so that African

⁵⁷ SUN 2020.

⁵⁸ CASTILLO – AMOAH 2020, p 560.

⁵⁹ ZHOU ET AL. 2016, p 158.

⁶⁰ SUN 2020.

⁶¹ CASTILLO – AMOAH 2020, p 560.

⁶² VAN STADEN 2020.

⁶³ VAIDYANATHAN 2020, p 7.

migrants can continue their lives and activities in China, and Chinese migrants can foster their businesses across the African continent.

6. Concluding remarks

On 24 May, Chinese State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi made some firm statements about China–Africa relations at a press conference on the sidelines of the 13th National People’s Congress, when talking about China’s foreign policy priorities in 2020. According to CGTN, Wang said that his country is working out the means and methods to “*implement the debt service suspension initiative to ease Africa’s debt burden and it mulls further bilateral support for African countries to fight against COVID-19. China has sent medical expert teams to Africa’s five sub-regions and their neighbouring countries and has conducted nearly 400 training sessions in Africa for around 20,000 local medical workers as part of sharing anti-epidemic experience.*”⁶⁴ Wang underlined that China has always partnered with Africa for “common development” – all showing firm Chinese commitment to continue working together with and supporting African development, while obviously serving Chinese needs and national interests. This clearly reveals that the Chinese government is aware of the threats the pandemic has brought with it, including the hardships of Africans in China. While China’s prominent position in the international system cannot be hampered by such tensions, in particular, when those come from close allies who have been supportive of China’s politics on the world stage for decades, African countries’ further rise to a level where more assertive behaviour is demonstrated, with a clearly critical African voice of agency, even towards “big brother”, are yet to be monitored and analysed. With regard to the continuous flow of Chinese people to Africa and African people to China, lessons must be learned on both ends – and in fact for the entire international system – for the post-COVID-19 era. By monitoring and analysing all these changes, a more nuanced picture can be drawn about global African migrations in light of pragmatic foreign policies towards, and of, the many state entities of the continent.

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⁶⁴ CGTN 2020.

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