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This book represents a detailed account of the journey of the author, Howard Waring French, across various nations within the African continent. In 10 main chapters, French masterfully presented his travels across various countries in Africa to meet different individuals – from Chinese entrepreneurs to American diplomats – to convey his points about what the Chinese are doing in Africa and how their presence is radically transforming the region. In the book, French wrote in a classical reporter style of describing his many conversations with both locals and foreigners, mainly Chinese, with the nature of such meetings sometimes planned and sometimes serendipitous, followed by a combination of both his retrospective inner thoughts and at-the-moment observations to provide relevant context to the reader so that it would be easier to follow French's arguments without much background knowledge. The chapters are arranged by country from Mozambique to Namibia. As a whole, French attempted to inform the reader of the trend of emigration of the Chinese from China to various nations in the African continent, whether state-sponsored or not, as well as to find out further about the motivations, experiences, future plans, and impacts of these individuals. In doing so, French hoped to shed some light on this evolving situation that would potentially have significant implications on global economics and international politics in the near future. In this book review, I will attempt to elaborate on the relevance of the consolidation of power through governmentality and the conception of poverty with the various accounts presented in the book, and thus showcase the value that French brings through this book. I will also discuss my thoughts on the importance of sustainable growth, something that is often sidestepped by the Chinese in Africa, as well as argue that this phenomenon of Chinese emigration and the spread of Chinese soft power and sphere of influence mirror the imperialistic and hegemonic traits of Western colonialism, despite their different manifestations, and that it is not uniquely tied with Africa especially as the Belt and Road Initiative continues to progress in full speed.

In the book, French went into great depth in exploring the different situations that various Chinese individuals in Africa were embedded in, as well as their many thoughts,

actions, convictions, assumptions, and aspirations. This gives us an extensive account of the different representations of the Chinese individuals living in Africa at the time, both from their own perspectives as well as from the author's perspective. From struggling entrepreneurs working in the agriculture industry who believed in "eat[ing] bitter" (French, 2014, pg. 22) to allow their subsequent generations to live a better life to wealthy owners of construction companies who lived in bungalow houses and planned to admit their children into top American colleges, the Chinese individuals encountered by French are very diverse in terms of their backgrounds and socioeconomic statuses. Yet, their rags-to-riches stories are mostly similar starting from their dissatisfactions with their home country to their newfound riches as a result of their opportunistic mindset coupled with grit and hard work. More importantly, most of them surprisingly share similar preconceptions regarding the work ethic and the future of Africans that are worth inspecting. A Chinese in Senegal told the author that the locals "are impossible to teach, whether it is how to run a business, or how to build a building, or how to make a road" (French, 2014, pg. 74). Another Chinese in the village of Alatona, Mali mentioned that the Malians "work hard, as long as you watch them" (French, 2014, pg. 174), and yet another one in Ghana noted that "some people in Ghana don't work very hard" (French, 2014, pg. 203).

On the other hand, the local Africans had developed preconceptions about their Chinese bosses as giving them work with "rough and dangerous conditions, low pay and punishing hours" (French, 2014, pg. 45). These comments seem to reflect the racial stereotypes that both races had of each other, which in turn, "shape [their] social expectations" (Monson & Rupp, 2013, pg. 33) of the "other". These notions hint at a power relationship between the Chinese and the Africans that is arguably not just personal, but also extends to the governmental level. Foucault explained that "a power relationship can only be articulated on the basis of two elements which are each indispensable if it is really to be a power relationship: that "the other" (the one over whom power is exercised) be thoroughly recognized and maintained to the very end as a person who acts; and that, faced with a relationship of power, a whole field of responses, reactions, results, and possible inventions may open up" (Foucault, 1982, pg. 789). This power relationship seemed to reflect both the relationship between the Chinese and their African employees, as well as the relationship

between the African government-level elites and the rest of their population. As mentioned again and again by French, the African governments seemed to be willingly involved with “stadium diplomacy” (Lancaster, 2006, pg. 32) with the Chinese government and they seem to extend some level of leniency toward the Chinese in their nations, even if the Chinese do not treat their local employees fairly. French elaborated that there is rampant corruption within the African governments. Through the tale of Joseph F. Kamara, the head of Sierra Leone’s Anti-Corruption Commission, French demonstrated that the fight against corruption is “a steep uphill battle against powerful, moneyed forces that operated in the shadows” (French, 2014, pg. 140). This further solidifies the ruling elite’s attempt of gaining power for the sake of gaining power. In the end, the poor ordinary people got the short end of the stick as they remain the lowest in the power hierarchy. This showcases the value of French’s book as it highlights a complex, nuanced portrait of the various issues that African nations face, which is in contrast to the usually naïve and provocative depiction of the Chinese-African relations shown by popular media.

A common complaint by the Africans against the Chinese that French noted was the lack of meaningful transfer of knowledge, technology, and expertise since the local African workers are often “reduced to the role of task boys” (French, 2014, pg. 124). Many Chinese enterprises in Africa employ fellow Chinese as engineers, technicians, and researchers, even if the costs of doing so are higher than hiring locals. The usual line of reasoning employed by the Chinese employers was mainly driven by the aforementioned biases and prejudices with regard to the capabilities of the locals. For instance, one chief engineer of a Chinese textile factory in Mali mentioned to the author that it is not possible for Malians to run the plant since “they’d have lots of problems – management problems, technical problems – in short, lots of things would go wrong” (French, 2014, pg. 179). The probability of passing on this higher-order knowledge and skills is thinned out by these assumptions that the Chinese make of the locals. The language being used by the Chinese to describe the local Africans conveys the way they perceive them. This was juxtaposed to the common “win-win” rhetoric and promises of mutual benefit that French had heard so often from Chinese officials and ambassadors. It seemed that officially, China wanted to portray its involvement in Africa to be “driven by fraternal solidarity with Africans, its fellow victims of colonization, its fellow

travelers on the path to development” (French, 2014, pg. 170). Both usages of new vocabularies in the context of poverty in Africa reflect the way poverty became an organizing concept as an essential trait of Africa, part of the Third World, and that the solution was economic growth. As a result, this brought into existence new discourses and practices that shape the daily reality that both Chinese and Africans live in on the ground. China also utilized this to justify its efforts of intervening in the eradication of poverty, since the chronic conditions of poverty and social unrest that exist in developing African countries might pose a threat to the level of global stability. This explains the seeming contradiction between China’s deep involvement in Africa and its principle of “non-interference in each other’s internal affairs” (Taylor, 2006, pg. 18) that was supposed to guide Beijing’s foreign policy. China was also careful so as to only formally sponsor companies that align with the interests of the Party in public infrastructure projects, while unofficially encouraging individual Chinese to emigrate to Africa and do business there, thereby deepening its roots of influence from the governmental level to the people level. French noted that this “almost haphazard” (French, 2014, pg. 264) manner of the life stories of the new Chinese in Africa might hint that there was no deliberate, grand scheme taking place. However, the outcomes of the actions of these various individuals are what mattered in the end. In this way, French’s book also brings value in terms of showcasing that large changes do not have to be brought about by a huge, sudden force. Sometimes, it is the cumulative and consistent effort of commonfolk across time that brings about more persistent and deep-rooted shifts.

French’s accounts of how the Chinese conducted their businesses in Africa seem to suggest that they are not concerned with sustainable growth, something that could potentially be detrimental for them, the locals, and the rest of the world. As what French had mentioned, “there was mounting resentment over the way China was seen to be exporting its labor, dumping cheap goods, despoiling the environment, dispossessing powerless landholders or flouting local laws, fueling corruption, and most of all, empowering awful governments” (French, 2014, pg. 125). There is a certain level of hypocrisy between the Chinese themselves in this aspect. A senior company official of Sinohydro, a Chinese state-owned hydropower engineering and construction company told the *Financial Times* in an interview that “The reason we are going abroad is just to make money. In this process, we

will protect the environment, assume social responsibilities, help development and help alleviate local poverty” (French, 2014, pg. 192). Yet, as mentioned by João Pereira, the director of an indigenous NGO in Mozambique called the Civil Society Support Mechanism, when he talked with the directors of Chinese timber companies, they would state that “Our problem is not your environment. Your environment is a question for your future, not ours. Talk to me about money. I came here to make money and I have brought money to your country” (French, 2014, pg. 217). While it might be understandable that this behaviour might be driven by the Chinese wanting to make a quick buck, French’s encounters seem to suggest that at least some Chinese individuals do possess some medium-term vision for their lives and business opportunities. For instance, a Chinese in Liberia mentioned the possibility of selling redwood trees and that “it would take twenty years to deplete these forests” (French, 2014, pg. 101), before pointing out that Liberia’s basic resources need to somewhat inevitably be used to create some basic wealth first. That said, in the long term, sustainable economic growth would be needed if the Chinese want to achieve their "win-win" goal. In March 2016, the Thirteenth Five-Year Plan adopted by China’s National People’s Congress actually showcased this realization (The 13th Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development of the People’s Republic of China, 2016, pg. 7). The focus transitions away from an investment-dependent growth model to innovation, structural reform, and environmental protection. Whether the many Chinese companies in Africa follow this shift in focus and how they would implement such measures is a different story altogether.

China’s largesse in Africa is often highlighted by popular media, especially Western ones, including this book itself, to alert the international audience to be aware of and question China’s intentions in enlarging its sphere of influence. However, we should take note that the actions of the Chinese are not uniquely tied to the African continent. Indeed, the efforts of Chinese enterprises can be seen throughout the globe, mainly in other countries in Asia and the Middle East. For instance, a news article reporting on Bangladesh’s engagement with China’s Belt and Road Initiative mentioned that “China is currently the biggest trading partner of Bangladesh and Bangladesh is set to receive Chinese investments of over \$40 billion under the bilateral partnership. From 2009 to 2019, the Dhaka Tribune found that China invested an estimated \$9.75 billion in transportation projects in Bangladesh.” (Rahman, 2021) In fact,

due to the lack of transparency surrounding the transfer of Chinese funds for the sake of foreign aid, there is an entire research lab, AidData, dedicated to “figure out what China is funding where, and to what effect” to “facilitate rigorous analysis and support evidence-based decision-making” (*AidData’s Global Chinese Development Finance Dataset*, 2021). As clarified by French, this Chinese “empire” is not being built by the usual architects of the old Western empires. Instead, it is a million migrants outside China that are making a real impact in the world on a global scale. As French mentioned, it is this emigration activity that “provides the most striking parallels with imperial patterns of the past...arguably the latest chapter in a very long narrative of empire construction through emigration” (French, 2014, pg. 263). Despite all of China’s denials about any hegemonic ambitions, these patterns of activity clearly reflect an empire-building enterprise similar to the late Western imperialism and colonialism, French argued, leading to history repeating itself.

One could argue that the author should have been more balanced in his approach. The book went to great length to imply that China possesses some kind of hidden intentions, almost as if bidding for soft power. However, we do have to acknowledge that Beijing’s foreign aid to Africa indeed was effective in producing economic growth in recipient countries (Dreher et al., 2017, pg. 19) and that 71% of Chinese contributions to peacekeeping operations have been in Africa (Suzuki, 2009, pg. 783). As mentioned earlier, French also seemed to suggest that only the corrupt ruling elites appreciate China’s investment in development efforts in Africa. In contrast, another account gave a more nuanced perspective on this situation, showing that there was actually a general approval of the Chinese presence in Africa by Africans (Mohan et al., 2014), although qualified in various ways. Another work also noted that “On the whole, however, African nations welcome China’s engagement. Increased trade, aid, investment, education, vocational training and debt relief have all benefited these societies. Public opinion polling in Africa shows the most positive perceptions of China anywhere in the world.” (Shambaugh, 2013, pg. 90) China is also evidently not the only country following this strategy, as other emerging powers such as India are also putting in a fast-growing amount of investment in Africa for similar national goals (Dye, 2022). Furthermore, we have no way of knowing how representative the individuals that French had met during his travels were. While interesting and sometimes even revealing, French’s

encounters might not generalize to the entire African and Chinese population in the continent. As such, potential readers of this book should adopt a critical mind while going through French's travels so as to not fall into traps of biases and prejudices that we have previously discussed at length.

In conclusion, French's rich and nuanced book provides an engaging, ground-level narrative about the current happenings regarding the relations between China and Africa. The book is also thought-provoking as French shared some of his personal views on how China's current involvements in Africa would, intentionally or not, potentially allow China to amass global preeminence. Overall, while the book could have been more balanced, it is still an excellent read nonetheless. I would definitely recommend the book to anyone looking to gain new insights into what the Chinese are doing in Africa from their perspectives and the locals' and to become aware of China's intricate political and economic play in Africa.

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