

INTRODUCTION

THE DELICATE TISSUE BEING WOVEN BETWEEN AFRICA AND CHINA

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In the late nineties, I was writing a book in the war-torn Congolese city of Kisangani when I met two young Indian brothers who'd just opened a shop in the city centre. It was a modest shop where one could buy basic necessities such as rice, sugar, milk powder and matches. A faint smell of soap was hanging in the air.

While others complained that Kisangani was going down the drain and turned to the UN and NGO's for jobs and help, the Duseja brothers were full of energy. They were studying the market and talked about *opportunities*. Soon enough they were importing motorcycles made in China for the diamond- and gold-diggers in town.

Because of the war, Kisangani had been cut off from the capital Kinshasa. Goods were no longer arriving with the boats on the Congo River and before long, I noticed another movement: local traders were flying to Dubai to buy supplies, and even ventured as far as the Chinese harbour city of Guanzou, as they called it. They didn't speak English or Chinese but assured me they got by because they had compatriots living there, who acted as their guides and translators. Africans from all over the continent were meeting in those market hubs, they said. Far away from home they'd created a little Africa.

Having come to Congo for the first time in 1985, on the trail of a grand-uncle who'd been a missionary back in colonial times, I was curious to know how Africans felt about a relationship that wasn't tainted by a colonial past. In 2009, I followed the African merchants eastwards. I hadn't been to China before, I didn't speak Chinese, I discovered China with them and in the beginning, they often served as my guides.

The first hub I came upon was the pink Tianxiu building in Guangzhou, a beehive of Chinese and African shops, restaurants and improvised hotels. As it was six to eight hours earlier back home, the traders were up late, checking how their shops had done that day, taking new orders. The Chinese in the building moved along, knocking on the door at three in the morning to sell phone cards or ask for laundry to be washed. 'Guangzhou,' a Congolese trader exclaimed, 'that's Kinshasa if it would work!'

Most African merchants, I would soon discover, weren't interested in my quest. They

were immersed in their work and as I walked into their orbit, they eyed me curiously. ‘The Netherlands,’ a Malian shop owner said, ‘they produce milk powder, don’t they? How much does a tin of five kilos cost?’ He was truly astonished I didn’t know. ‘You and I,’ he mused, ‘we could do good business together.’

Yet, while they were trading, they looked around. I shall not forget the Congolese man who paused in front of a 24-hour high-rise construction site about to be finished and said: ‘Look at this. I passed by here less than a year ago. At that time, it was just a hole in the ground.’

I travelled at quite a speed. In Beijing, I met African students, diplomats and artists; in Jinhua, I spent time at the Institute of African Studies that had recently opened, and continued to Yiwu, the new commercial hub everyone was talking about. Soon my head was filled with African voices commenting on their experiences. ‘When I visited Versailles and the Louvre with my father, I was intimidated,’ a Rwandan student confessed, ‘we’ll never be able to catch up with that. But when I look at the development in China over the last decades, I say to myself: What keeps us from doing the same?’

His brother had an office in the High-Tech Industrial Park in Shenzhen, he assisted his compatriots in buying small industrial units to make juice or biscuits, and followed up on a big Rwandese order of a factory for bio-degradable bags. ‘In the past, upon hearing the word “factory”, we thought about a German colossus in a three-story building,’ he smiled when I visited him. ‘That myth has been debunked: with 5000 euro you can install a machine in your garage that assembles mobile phones. China has democratised industrialisation for us.’

I went to conferences about the China-Africa relationship, learned about barter deals, became aware of the traps and shady sides. But the dynamics of the day-to-day relationship between Africans and Chinese interested me more. Slowly Chinese voices were resounding in my head as well.

Professor Li Baoping of Peking University was travelling by train from the Cameroonian capital Yaoundé to Douala when a passing inspector questioned the legitimacy of his visa and took him into the corridor. He’d have to report him to his superior, he said, unless... ‘How much?’ Li Baoping asked, before pressing a coin worth a dollar in the inspector’s hand. ‘Shame on you,’ the man protested; he wanted ten times more. ‘In China we had a philosopher called Confucius,’ Li Baoping responded. ‘He used to say: *Everybody loves money, but let’s earn it in an honest way.*’ Upon which the inspector handed him back his passport and shooed Baoping away. Confucius in a train in Cameroon – that’s quite a change from the teachings of Jesus my grand-uncle used to preach.

Li Shudi was an art teacher in his native Kaifeng when he decided to go to South-Africa in the early nineties to earn money. He and his wife worked in Taiwanese factories and opened a clothing shop in Durban, but Shudi was an artist at heart and ended up coming back to China to teach. ‘The Chinese government embraces African leaders and claims: “We are your brothers,”’ he said, ‘but they don’t know the rest of the family, they don’t speak their language nor understand their art. The Spanish painter Picasso was inspired by African sculpture. Instead of studying his work, we should have our own Picasso.’

With all these voices in mind, the question *Is China recolonizing Africa* I often heard back home, sounded rather derogatory to me. It's as if, sixty years after independence, Africa is little more than a victim, ready to be lured into submission again. It's looking at the situation without evaluating the experiences and dynamics on the ground.

African and Chinese traders, workers, students, scholars and consultants are travelling back and forth between Africa and China and sharing their fortunes and misfortunes with their compatriots. They might have come for financial reasons but along the way things change: they cross bridges, develop relationships. Even if their governments don't consult them or listen to them, their stories spread. It's a mechanism that's very much alive and won't be easily done away with.

From the Congolese boys outside the Chinese UN-compound in Eastern-Congo, who imitate the Tai Chi-moves and songs of the soldiers; to the Chinese girl on the campus of Jinhua University standing straight on the back of her African boyfriend's motorcycle; to the African female student singing a Chinese love song on the celebration of Chinese New Year – a delicate tissue is being woven, one that will help define the future of China-Africa relations.

Luc Bendza grew up in Gabon and used to watch his Chinese neighbour perform his morning exercises. The neighbour taught him Chinese and when he was fourteen, Luc arrived in Beijing, wanting to learn how to fly as the Chinese in martial arts films do. He became a wushu champion and an actor and married Wei, a Chinese girl who'd come from a small town in Hebei to Beijing looking for a better life.

When their son was born, I was in Europe and I called Wei through Skype. She showed me Bo Wen: a strong baby with dimples and curly black hair. In the background, I saw her mother, who'd come to assist her in the first months after the birth – just like in Africa, as Luc specified. I knew the mother had been somewhat apprehensive about the marriage, until she'd met Luc, who's a great charmer. 'What does your mother think about her grandson?' I asked Wei. 'Oh, she's so proud of him!' she said, 'he's only three months old, but he can already sit; she calls all her friends to tell them he's much livelier than her other grandchildren.'

I didn't get to see Bo Wen on my last visit to China in 2016. He was four and too busy taking English classes after school. 'I want him to become smart and have a strong heart,' Wei said, 'so as to stand up to the remarks people in the neighbourhood might make.'

This summer, Wei came to Amsterdam and brought the 7-year-old boy with her. We took a long walk through the city. It was wonderful to see him run in front of us, marvelling at the ducks and swans in the canals, creating a world for himself in the children's section of the public library, confidently holding my hand in between spurts.

'He's playful,' Wei said somewhat worried, 'and he's not very good at maths in school. Other kids take extra math lessons, but I decided not to.' She still wanted Bo Wen to be smart and have a strong heart, but she also wanted him to be happy, so after school, she sometimes accompanied him to the playground instead.

Those loving eyes on that little boy, the way she'd accepted he was different, her willingness to adjust – Wei is an ambitious woman, but she's also sensitive and adventurous: I

trust her to make the right decisions to help Bo Wen find his way in life. I'm going to follow that boy. I think he might teach me some things about the encounter between China and Africa.