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Moving Beyond “China in Africa”: Insights from Zambian Immigration Data

Hannah POSTEL

Abstract: China’s growing presence in Africa is not news: the expansion of bilateral trade and investment ties has garnered intense media and political focus over the past decade. However, less is known about the people accompanying these increasingly intensive flows of goods and capital. This paper focuses on Zambia, drawing on multiple primary datasets to shed light on both the scale and nature of Chinese migration to the continent. Two years of Department of Immigration employment-permit data serve as the basis for the first quantitative analysis of the “Chinese” in “Africa,” illuminating the increasing diversity of this population flow. While the growing Chinese presence in Africa is often viewed as a coherent neocolonialist strategy planned and implemented by the Chinese state, this paper demonstrates that it is in fact typified by a multitude of both public and private actors with independent motives.

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Keywords: China, Zambia, international migration, development, South–South relations, labour

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Introduction

The growth of Chinese communities in Africa has become a high-profile trend, attracting global journalistic and political attention. However, the size of these migration flows is still unknown. The lack of any respectable quantitative estimates both impedes rigorous analysis and enables wildly speculative estimates to fill these gaps. Such claims have sparked political tensions and contributed to the pervasive yet unsubstantiated view that China is building a new empire in Africa (see French 2014). Zambia is perhaps the most (in)famous example, where late Zambian president Michael Sata's alarmist claims that 80,000 Chinese residents were "infesting" the country contributed to a xenophobic political campaign and at times violent racial tensions on Chinese-run worksites.

This paper¹ draws on multiple primary data sources to construct a more accurate quantitative estimate of the size of the Chinese population in Zambia. Most existing estimates of overall migration trends are approximate or purely qualitative. Moreover, these figures exist mainly in aggregate: exact numbers for specific African countries have remained even more elusive. Though unreliable statistics and fluid migration patterns make accurate estimates difficult, this paper develops a novel approximation methodology involving intensive data and metadata analysis. Unpublished quantitative data on more than 25,000 immigration permits, in addition to unpublished census details and total immigration figures, are supplemented by in-depth interviews with Zambian government officials, Chinese government and industry representatives, and international organisation staff. A

1 Research for this paper was conducted during the author's William J. Fulbright research fellowship in Zambia from 2013–2014, supported by the Institute for International Education/U.S. State Department as well as the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health & Human Development of the National Institutes of Health under Award Number P2CHD047879. The content is solely the responsibility of the author and does not necessarily represent the official views of the National Institutes of Health. The author thanks Solange Guo Chatelard, Yoon Jung Park, Zara Rabinovitch, Zander Rounds, and two anonymous reviewers for valuable input and feedback. A prior version of this paper was presented at the Determinants of International Migration Conference at the University of Oxford International Migration Institute in September 2014, a Rohatyn Center of International Affairs lecture at Middlebury College in January 2015, and the London School of Economics and Political Science Africa Summit in April 2016.

best-faith estimate incorporating these data and local contextual factors indicates that the Chinese population in Zambia could range from a likely 13,000 people to a maximum of 22,000, far below the 80,000 to 100,000 number most frequently cited.

The detailed immigration permit data gathered can also provide insight into migrant characteristics. Through analysis of Chinese labour migrants' employers and position titles, this paper lends quantitative backing to existing ethnographic analyses. While the growing Chinese presence in Africa is often viewed as a coherent neocolonialist strategy fully planned and implemented by the Chinese state, it is in fact typified by a multitude of both public and private actors with independent motives. A quantitative analysis of recent employment permit trends helps to disaggregate the "Chinese" in "Africa," making evident the increasing diversity of these population flows. Though this paper focuses solely on Zambia, similar methodologies could be applied in other contexts to quantify and describe migrant communities.

Chinese Emigration to Africa

Emigration from China has increased dramatically over the past quarter century: from around 4.1 million Chinese living overseas in 1990 to 9.3 million in 2013 (an approximately 130 per cent increase) (Wang 2014). This paper focuses exclusively on Chinese (PRC) nationals living abroad rather than the broader category of ethnic Chinese overseas. Changes in Chinese emigration law in the latter half of the twenty-first century facilitated this increased outward movement: Deng Xiaoping's 1978 Reform and Openness policy liberalising emigration controls was followed by the 1985 "neutralisation" of emigration legislation, "seeking to disentangle outward movement from geopolitical and ideological concerns" (Mohan et al. 2014: 43). In addition, China's bid to join the World Trade Organization (WTO) necessitated reform of the country's entry-and-exit procedures; simplification of the passport application process enabled more Chinese nationals to travel and move abroad.

Ma Mung (2008) situates increased Chinese labour migration as part of a global movement, mirroring the intensification of consumer goods production in China. The growth of Chinese worker populations overseas is also inextricably linked with outward-facing trade

and investment policies. The Going Out policy of 1999 leveraged incentives and financial support to encourage companies to “go global” and invest overseas. As more Chinese businesses have begun to operate abroad, the accompanying flows of labour migrants have also increased.

While overseas Chinese communities have existed for centuries, historically they have been largely centred either in close proximity to China (i.e. Southeast Asia) or in traditional migration destinations (i.e. Europe, the United States). Mohan et al. (2014) note that over the past decades Chinese population flows have increasingly shifted to global resource frontiers. Chinese migration to Africa has emerged as a particularly notable new trend. Though small numbers of Chinese citizens had moved to South Africa and French colonies in the twentieth century, these populations did not grow considerably until the 1980s, when Chinese state-owned companies (SOEs) began to use international cooperation projects as a stepping stone into African markets (Kernen and Lam 2014). SOEs, state-backed projects, and bilateral cooperation programmes have been long-standing key drivers of Chinese migration to Africa. The aforementioned Going Out policy included many incentivised contracts with African governments, further encouraging overseas expansion and labour migration to the continent (Mohan et al. 2014). The rapid increase in Chinese migration to Africa over the past decade coincide not only with China’s increased FDI but also with China’s trade with various African countries (Mohan 2013). The first Forum on China–Africa Cooperation in 2000 encouraged both state and private Chinese actors to engage more intensively in Africa with regard to all three factors of production (capital, goods, and labour). The number of small-scale, independent entrepreneurial establishments – including shops, restaurants, other retail ventures, and small factories – has also increased over the past few years. Chinese migration to Africa therefore supports the hypothesis that “migrations are not an isolated phenomenon: movements of commodities and capital almost always give rise to movements of people” (Castles and Miller 2009: 4).

A Chinese Empire? Quantitative Considerations

While it is clear that the numbers of Chinese migrants in Africa have increased, especially over the last decade, approximations of this

growth have been ad hoc and immensely variable. Experts agree that estimates of the Chinese population in Africa have been anything from “speculative” to “very problematic” (Mohan and Tan-Mullins 2009: 601; Mohan 2013: 292). Discrepancies among suggested growth for a single country can range from 100 per cent to over 400 per cent (Ma Mung 2008). Solid empirical estimates are difficult to produce, for the following reasons.

First, accurate migration data are notoriously elusive across the board. The United Nations acknowledges that “in many countries, even the most general statistics on migration are incomplete, out-of-date or do not exist” (United Nations Economic Commission 2011: 4). This lack of data is due to multiple challenges including data availability, definitional complexities, and changing national borders. Though intensive work in recent years has yielded improvements, the most comprehensive migration databases still provide data in 10-year increments only, and depend almost entirely upon the quality of reporting-country data.

It is therefore worrisome that African countries often lack the necessary infrastructure to produce high-quality statistics – the second major data issue. The weakness of basic data building blocks is made clear by the “instability of even headline economic statistics like growth and poverty” (Center for Global Development 2014: xi). For example, solely adjusting the base year for Nigeria’s GDP calculations led to an 89 per cent jump in the figure reported (Center for Global Development 2014: xi). Inaccurate measurements, inconsistent modelling methodologies, and missing data are major issues. This potential for internal inaccuracies is compounded in any attempt to compare data across countries, since countries do not experience these issues uniformly. Moreover, “the lack of transparency in reporting and the paucity of information accompanying the datasets mean that data users are easily misled” (Jerven 2013: 29). Data quality often reflects donor funding priorities; since migration falls outside of most major donor aid projects, it is not surprising these statistics are not prioritised. Finally, even if relevant data exist, the relevant government offices can be reluctant to communicate these figures to the broader public (Kernen and Lam 2014; McNamee et al. 2012).

Third, hard data on Chinese nationals overseas has always been elusive. While citizens abroad are not typically required to register with their local embassy, some countries are more hands-on than

others in keeping track of their in-country nationals (such as the United States, which strongly encourages registration in its Smart Traveler Enrollment Program). China has no such programme. Chinese business associations can provide lists of registered companies in a specific country, and estimates of total numbers of employees for larger companies, but again a total count (and any source on non-labour migrants) is lacking. The concept of the “Chinese overseas” has additionally been very difficult to define (Poston, Mao, and Yu 1994). The definition of the Chinese diaspora has a long history of complicated legal and political debate, and often includes individuals who would not self-define as Chinese. To date, the scholarly literature

has either neglected the issue of data quality and therefore accepted the data at face value or dismissed the data as unreliable and therefore irrelevant. (Jerven 2013: 110)

Yet this need not be the case. Increased international attention to data collection and quality in the developing world could also be applied to population numbers. In the specific case of Chinese communities in Africa, a foundational study established the need for a more detailed look at existing data, and the potential of developing a more robust analytical framework by questioning underlying assumptions (Mohan and Tan-Mullins 2009). This need still exists.

The lack of reliable population numbers has enabled speculative, inflated estimates to exaggerate the supposed Chinese “threat” (Mohan and Tan-Mullins 2009). Hype and speculation run rife, encouraged by both local and international media attention. In actuality, the different forms of contemporary Chinese migration to Africa do not largely “differ from those of historical migrations – temporary contractual, entrepreneurial and proletarian” (Ma Mung 2008: 653). Regardless, the growing number of Chinese nationals in Africa has raised questions about the intent and outcomes of their presence, and encouraged fears that China is “building a new empire on the continent” (French 2014). These concerns have led to xenophobic election rhetoric, occasional outbreaks of violence, and widespread belief in unfounded myths such as China’s supposed export of prison labour. Empirically sound data establishing baseline trends could help to avoid these sorts of negative outcomes.

Estimating the Chinese Population in Zambia

The Chinese population in Zambia is one of the most famously exaggerated on the continent. In his first bid for the presidency in 2006, late Zambian president Michael Sata leveraged an alarmist claim of 80,000 Chinese residents to support his populist platform. Some researchers have since dismissed this as a xenophobic “scare number” made up for purely political purposes, instead suggesting an estimate somewhere between 4,000 and 15,000 (Kopinski and Polus 2011; Yan and Sautman 2009). However, exaggerated figures of 80,000 to 100,000 continue to appear as fact in many widely read publications (e.g. French 2014; Carmody, Hampwaye, and Sakala 2012; McNamee et al. 2012), biasing analysis of the subject. The persistence of this discredited number in public discourse highlights the need for a more credible estimate of the Chinese population in Zambia.

Despite the data and methodological issues discussed above, it is possible to improve upon current estimates of Chinese populations in Africa. This study will draw on data from the Zambian census (2010) and immigration permit logs (2011, 2012) to create an estimate of the Chinese community at year-end 2012. Qualifying multiple datasets with collection methodology, other metadata, and qualitative observations yields more accurate results through more precise data use and in-depth understanding of the topic at hand. This mixed-methods approach accords with Jerven’s assertion that “quantitative analysis can be fruitful only if it is based in careful criticism of the source and is supplemented by qualitative investigation” (Jerven 2013: 35).

To enable this analysis, the author manually transcribed details from more than 25,000 unpublished immigration permits. Data access was facilitated by the Zambian Development Agency, which played an advisory role in the research process. Though the Department of Immigration compiles aggregate immigration statistics that are readily available to researchers, anything more granular resides in hand-written permit log books, compiled on a weekly basis from the immigration desk officers (see Figure 1). There is no institutional arrangement to facilitate such data sharing; access was largely facilitated by a prominent immigration officer with an individual interest in understanding broader immigration trends.

Figure 1. Sample Immigration Permit Log

		PERMIT NO.	FILE NO.	COMPANY NAME/ADDRESS.
CHINA	CHINA	019240	Z.0109/13	CHINA HENAN LTD
CHAO	"	019769	Z.0109/11	ZESCO
RING	"	019768	Z.0114/11	CHINA JIANGXI LTD
HEALG	"	020966	Z.0211/12	SOGECOA (Z) LTD
ANG	"	0184126	Z.0325/12	NFC
ANG	"	020954	Z.0219/09	CHINA GANSU
	"	020960	Z.0202/12	AVIC-INTL PROJECT
N	"	020790	Z.0263/12	HELA (HANG) LTD
G	"	019233	Z.0094/12	CHIBUUMA
	"	020758	Z.0266/12	MARINE CLEANING
	"	020762	Z.0267/12	ZIDA - HENAN (HONG)
ANG	"	019235	Z.0104/12	GOLDEN HORSE
ERG	"	019000	Z.0095/12	WAH KONG LTD
	"	018796	Z.0102/12	CHAMBISHI
	"	019247	Z.0050/12	CHINA CAMC LTD
	"	018972	Z.0051/09	ZESCO
	"	018961	Z.0052/09	NFC
	"	017415	Z.0009/12	KATSHENG AGRICULTURE
O	"	019002	Z.0112/12	SOGECOA (Z) LTD
ANG	"	020777	Z.0278/12	SEPCO (Z) LTD
IN	"	018101	Z.0394/08	ZHENG YUN MINING CO
	"	019228	Z.0055/11	WAN KONG ENTERPRISES
ING	"	020191	Z.0204/12	HANG JIANG
	"	019603	Z.0072/09	CHINA GEO
	"	019777	Z.0200/12	HUA JIANG INN LTD
	"	020639	Z.0270/12	MAOSHEALG GENERAL

Source: Zambian Department of Immigration 2014.

This exercise does not purport to yield a “correct” answer, but rather to set a reasonable, facts-based baseline for future reference and analysis. For the purposes of this estimation, the Chinese migrant community is comprised of Chinese citizens (1) who reside in Zambia at the time of the census plus (2) those in possession of long-term (2+ year) permits for work and residence. Many more entry visas and temporary permits were granted to Chinese nationals, but due to the short duration of their Zambia stays these individuals are not here considered to be migrants. Dual citizenship was not permitted by either country at the time of this study.

The most recent Zambian census was conducted in late 2010, and reported that 0.8 per cent of the population (100,210 people) fit the aggregate grouping “Major Racial Groups,” defined as “Other Africans, Americans, Asians, and Europeans.” In an unpublished report provided by the Statistics Department, the author identified 1,007 Chinese citizens resident in Zambia in 2010. However, the census sampling methodology excluded most residents of “institu-

tional” housing, a category including hotels/motels/lodges, hostels/guesthouses, hospitals, learning institutes (e.g. boarding schools), prisons, refugee camps, police cells, and “other” categories. Any type of “collective quarters” was included in this category. Each structure of this type was assigned a single Census Building Number, and one individual answered the questionnaire for all current residents. This methodology likely caused an overall population undercount, but would have disproportionately impacted the Chinese community since many Chinese migrants live in non-traditional dwellings (e.g. on worksites, in collective housing, in special economic zones, or in residences attached to their business). Experts estimate that the Chinese population at the time was approximately 10,000 (Chatelard 2013).

All visitors require a visa to enter Zambia, with stays past 30 days requiring an additional longer-term permit. The six major permit types are: residence, visiting, study, employment, temporary, and self-employment (investor). Permitted length of stay varies from three months to 10 years. The below estimate compiled by the author is based on a list of unpublished total annual permit issuances from the Zambian Department of Immigration, including those permits with a duration over two years (residence, employment, and self-employment).

In utilising these flow numbers to construct a reliable stock estimate, one must take into account a number of considerations:

- Zambia does not have a separate permit for family reunion – family members enter on the same permit as the initial holder. This complicates the collection of accurate statistics, as only the individual granted a permit is written into the immigration records. For the purposes of this estimate, the raw permit count will be scaled by 1.5. Though only a minority of Chinese migrants to Zambia bring family members with them, when they do so it often involves a full extended family (two to six people).
- Exit records are especially poor. People leaving Zambia are supposed to turn in their permits and get their passport stamped upon exit; however, most people do not follow these requirements and exit stamps are recorded infrequently. This estimate attempts to correct for the following data biases:
 - Recorded exits include all individuals, not just those present on longer-term stays. The paper therefore scales the total number of exits by the ratio of long-term permit holders to total entrants in each year.

- Exit records measure all departures from Zambia, regardless of whether or not one plans to return. Interviews with members of the Chinese community provided the impression that long-term residents tend to return to China approximately twice a year – more for small business owners and less for public works contractors. The estimation framework will therefore assume that one out of every three annual departures is final.
 - Most fundamentally, exits are severely undercounted. Officers at the Department of Immigration indicated that they normally received complete exit records from Kenneth Kaunda International Airport (the major point of departure for Chinese citizens) approximately two days of the week. The estimation has been scaled accordingly, though unfortunately there is no way to know the frequency of China-bound flights on the days reported.
- Renewals are counted as new permit issuances, thus overstating the number of new entries. The estimation reflects the qualitative report that approximately one in four Chinese migrants stays in Zambia past the duration of their current permit.
- As reported in much of the literature on Chinese communities in Africa (e.g. Ma Mung 2008), overstaying visas is fairly common, leading to an underestimation of the true size of the population. This estimation builds on interviews and observation to assume that approximately one-third of individuals will overstay their visa. This is perhaps the most tenuous reach, but the analysis can be adjusted as better data on the subject is collected.

Table 1. Data Considerations in Constructing an Estimate of the Chinese Population in Zambia

Downward bias	Upward bias
Census	Exits undercounted
Multiple individuals on permit	Renewals
Exits count nonmigrants	
Exits count circular trips	
Visa overstay	

Table 2. Estimation Framework for the Chinese Population in Zambia, End of Year 2012

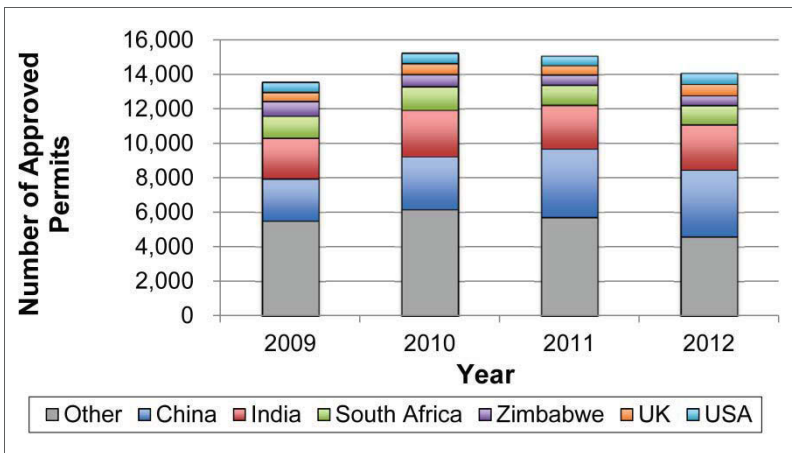
	Resolving Undercounts						Resolving Overcounts	
	Base	Census revision	Multiple on permit	Exits count non-mi-grants	Exits count circular	Over-stays	Exits under-counted	Renewals
Census 2010	1,007	10,000	10,000	10,000	10,000	10,000	10,000	10,000
Permits 2011	3,960	3,960	5,940	5,940	5,940	7,722	7,722	5,792
Permits 2012	3,803	3,803	5,705	5,705	5,705	7,417	7,417	5,563
Exits 2011	9,646	9,646	9,646	3,248	1,083	1,083	3,791	3,791
Exits 2012	11,692	11,692	11,692	3,936	1,312	1,312	4,592	4,592
Total, end of year 2012	-12,568	-3,575	307	14,461	19,250	22,744*	16,757	12,972**

*maximum value
 **most plausible value

Table 1 summarises the measurement biases this paper attempts to address. The first column of Table 2 provides the base values, with each additional column accounting for each underestimation to reach a maximum estimated population size of 22,744 individuals at the end of 2012. The following columns incorporate revised figures for upward biases, reaching a most likely population size of approximately 13,000 individuals.

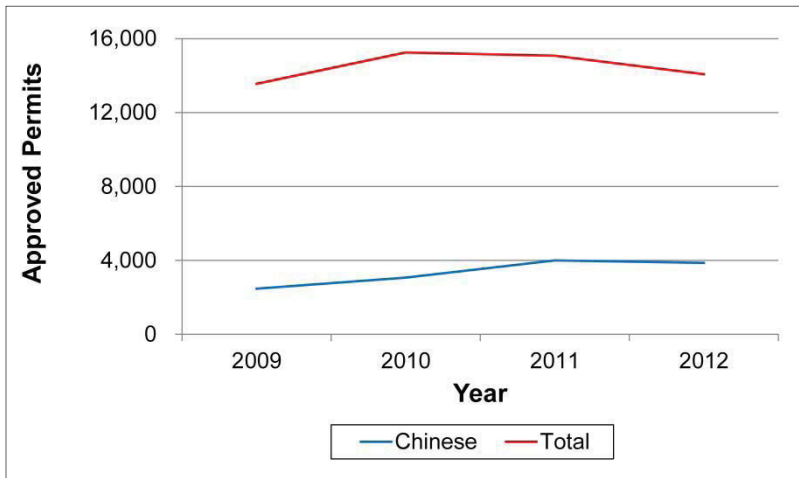
It is clear that even with imperfect data and methodology, the Chinese population in Zambia does not approach 80,000 people. At the estimated maximum value, Chinese migrants accounted for 0.15 per cent of the 2012 Zambian population of 14.8 million people. Figures 2 and 3 below show how Chinese nationals account for a large and growing percentage of new Zambian immigration permit recipients.

Figure 2. Approved Permits by Nationality



Source: Zambian Department of Immigration 2014.

Figure 3. Chinese Migration to Zambia



Source: Zambian Department of Immigration 2014.

Quantifying Common Claims and Trends

The author’s access to unpublished employment permit data for 2012 and 2013 also provided insight into other characteristics of the Chinese population in Zambia. The 2012 records provided information on the nationality, occupation, and employer of each permit holder. While the 2013 records did not include individual occupations, locational data was recorded for some of the permit-sponsoring employers, providing insight into patterns of residence in the country. This primary dataset is the first of its kind, and can be used to shed quantitative light on commonly discussed trends and issues related to Chinese migrant communities in Africa – specifically, migration typologies and broader implications.

Typologies

Chinese migration to Africa is often categorised into three different types: temporary labour migrants, small-scale entrepreneurs, and transit migrants. The first category can be divided into two sub-groups: semi-skilled labourers who mostly return to China after completing their contracts, and a smaller group of managers and professionals often remaining in Africa as entrepreneurs. In her study of

Chinese activities in Zambia, Solange Guo Chatelard also includes a “small number of expatriates sent over by central and provincial government agencies to fulfill diplomatic, managerial and consultant functions in different sectors” (Chatelard 2011: 183).

Quantitative evidence from Zambia largely supports these typologies. Ninety-five per cent of the Chinese entering Zambia in 2012 (3,722 permits) were labour migrants. All but a few were employed by Chinese-owned companies. National or regional Chinese SOEs sponsored 2,026 individuals. Zambian government ministries directly hired 678 Chinese workers, while many more were working on Zambian government contracts won by large Chinese construction companies (see Table 3). One particularly telling example is the 446 individuals hired by the Zambian Ministry of Defence and Air Force. Though at first glance the possibility that Chinese nationals might be staffing Zambia’s military roster could be a cause for concern (especially given the extensive media focus on the Chinese “takeover” of Africa), permit details show that most if not all of these individuals were working to build the new Air Force barracks on a government contract with the Chinese construction giant Sinomach.

These figures illustrate how crucial government contracts are to the flow of Chinese labour migrants to Zambia. While not a single Sinohydro employee entered the country in 2012, this figure jumped to 136 in 2013 (direct employees; 333 when contract workers on other projects are included). The reverse is also true: while in 2012, 200 employees were hired by Sinomach and 446 by the contracting Ministry of Defence, after the project was completed the numbers dropped to 43 and 89, respectively, in 2013.

The distinction between different categories of Chinese labour migrants to Africa also largely holds true in Zambia. A number of Chinese managers said that staying in Zambia would end their careers, since personal connections central to successful business networking in China were impossible to maintain from such a distance. Such individuals joined those on short-term contracts returning to China after a few years in Zambia. Another group chose to remain to begin their own companies, often hiring more Chinese employees in turn. For example, an individual granted an investor’s permit in 2011 to establish the company Camland Construction sponsored 11 work permits for Chinese migrant employees in 2013. Chinese entrepreneurs accounted for 237 investment permits from January 2012 to

June 2014. These new businesses were largely concentrated in the construction, manufacturing, and mining industries.

Table 3. Zambian Employment Permits by Selected Companies, 2012–2013

Company Name	2012	2013
Chinese State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs)	1,611	2,884
China Henan International Cooperation Group (CHICO)	129	234
China Nonferrous Mining & Subsidiaries (includes Chambishi Mine, NFC Africa, Sinometals Leach)	423	521
Avic International (mainly road construction)	75	178
China Geo-Engineering	152	302
China Jiangxi Corporation for International, Economic, and Technical Cooperation	61	157
Sepco Electric Power Construction	36	409
Sinohydro	0	136
Sinoma International Engineering	109	153
China National Machinery Industry Corporation (Sinomach)	200	43
Sogecoa (Anhui Foreign Economic Construction Group subsidiary)	55	121
ZTE (telecommunications)	112	46
Chinese Private Companies	315	538
Hua Chang Infrastructure Engineering	70	56
Hua Jiang Investments	34	86
Wah Kong Enterprises	49	71
Yangts Jiang Enterprises	54	136
Zambian Government – Direct	678	530
Ministry of Defence	446	89
Zesco (electricity parastatal)	81	285
Other	1,118	1,945
Itezhi Tezhi Power Corporation (Joint venture between Tata Group & Zesco implemented by Sinohydro)	23	103
Kariba North Bank Extension Project (Zesco implemented by Sinohydro)	62	94
Zambia-China Economic and Trade Cooperation Zone	34	55
Total	3,722	5,897

The permit data could not fully identify the labour migrants in the “other” category above, though it is likely that most of these individuals work for small Chinese-owned businesses (typically restaurants, import-export shops, and spin-off construction companies). It is impossible to determine the exact nature of many of these enterprises due to data imprecision and the disputed, highly variant role of state influence on Chinese businesses – even those that are privately owned. After joint ventures and third-country corporations large enough to individually identify are accounted for, it is possible to state that perhaps 60 per cent of the remaining Chinese individuals on work permits were in Zambia to support private businesses.

Chinese transit migrants are likely very limited. It is impossible to estimate the number due precisely to their transient nature and poor immigrant exit records, but a large majority of the Chinese community as observed and self-described planned either to remain in Zambia or to return to China in the medium term rather than move to a third country. This information is perhaps better captured in original entry visa data, as individuals looking to move onwards would have no reason to pursue long-term residence in Zambia. A similar lack of data applies for irregular migration, likely due to a lack of bureaucratic and enforcement capacity in the Zambian government.

Descriptive Implications

Employment data on Chinese nationals in Zambia illuminate the economic and social role these individuals play in-country. Many aspiring Chinese migrants fit Zambian immigration policy aims of admitting highly educated, investment-seeking foreigners to combat the local skills gap. This is demonstrated by extremely high admission rates: less than 1 per cent of Chinese work permit applicants were rejected in 2012. Coding for terms such as “manager,” “director,” and “senior” resulted in the identification of 2,754 permit holders in managerial occupations. Chinese nationals accounted for 923 of these managerial permits, entering Zambia to play a supervisory role.

The Chinese population in Zambia shows that emigration from China is increasingly geographically diverse, with increasing representation from central and northern China. Though a departure from the traditional demographics (in the twentieth century Chinese emigrants largely came from coastal regions such as Guangdong, Zhejiang, and Fujian), this can be largely explained by the employment-driven na-

ture of Chinese migration. Most large companies hire workers from their home regions – for example, the Chengdu-based Lusaka Pan Brick Company hires workers from its home province of Sichuan. The increasing number of migrants from poorer, inland provinces also highlights the juxtaposition between the career opportunities available to this demographic in China versus in Africa (Kernen and Lam 2014).

Though outsiders often refer to “the Chinese” as a homogenous group, the Chinese population in Zambia is relatively disjointed. Multiple long-term residents described how the community has splintered as numbers have grown. In the 1990s, the approximately 200 Chinese residents of Lusaka all knew each other and united around their shared identity. As the Chinese migrant population has grown and diversified, individuals now self-segregate into smaller groups, based on region of origin, gender, or occupation, as illustrated by the expanding numbers of Chinese community organisations. Twenty years ago only the Chinese Embassy existed; by contrast, two new regional migrant associations were created in 2014 alone. The growing population is linked to more intense competition within the Chinese community, with an increasing number of Chinese companies competing for market access and project bids.

This diversity is also politically significant, as Chatelard asserts:

Individuals and families have their own agenda which is often quite separate from the concerns of the Chinese government [...] it is not a homogeneous community of agents collectively working to forward a coherent government agenda. (Chatelard 2011: 187)

Chinese government representatives freely admit to maintaining contact almost exclusively with the Chinese employees of large state-owned enterprises seeking Zambian government contracts, and rarely, if ever, interacting with the sizeable group of individuals pursuing private interests. In fact, they reported they are unable to even estimate the size of the Chinese community. The “inability or unwillingness of the Chinese state to support and care for [Chinese migrants not associated with the state] in times of difficulty” has been a cause of tension in various Chinese communities in Africa (Xiao 2015: 84).

The growing Chinese presence in Africa continues to set off global alarm bells, as it is often viewed as a coherent neocolonialist strategy fully planned and implemented by the Chinese state. In actuality, this new Chinese migration is typified by a multitude of both

public and private actors with independent motives, similarly to other global population flows. However, it is important to keep in mind that at least to some degree, these smaller-scale, independent operations do still depend on “clement macro-relations” between China and the host country (Xiao 2015: 84).

Conclusion

Chinese migration to Zambia (and Africa more broadly) will likely continue to increase over the short-to-medium term. China’s population pressures and recent international business expansions are driving this trend. Chinese emigration has historically followed a chain migration pattern, with pioneer migrants creating opportunities in the destination country for friends and family to follow behind. The Chinese population in Zambia is still quite new; as life in Zambia is publicised and further business opportunities are created, more migrants will likely follow. It is important to keep scale in mind; however, other factors also play a role in how Chinese migration to Zambia is perceived. Chinese migrant communities are quite new and expanding quickly, have a disproportionate economic impact for their size, and are highly visible for multiple reasons.

This paper has leveraged primary data from Zambia to paint a more accurate and nuanced picture of the local Chinese community. As Mohan et al. state, there is a need to better understand “the nature, activities, and impacts of the expanding and more diverse expatriate communities that are being produced on the continent” (Mohan et al. 2014: 158). This cannot be done without better, fact-based comprehension of the scale of Chinese migration to Africa. While better administrative and census data will be most helpful to this venture in the long term, in-depth analyses of receiving countries’ immigration and statistics systems will be an improvement over the current state of knowledge.

The approximation methodology developed in this paper has potential to be leveraged and/or modified for other settings. Where available, administrative data provide much more granular insight into migration trends than aggregate sums. Bringing local context to bear on widely published figures (e.g. national census data) is central to conducting consistent, informed analyses. Future research could better inform the assumptions underlying the estimation framework,

specifically in regard to visa overstay and circular migration. Applying this estimation methodology to other African countries would yield insight into whether the total Chinese population on the continent is similarly overstated. Statistics are political: improved data and analyses can paint a more accurate and nuanced picture of local Chinese communities and help to contain detrimental political rhetoric.

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