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Chinese Migrants in Africa: Facts and Fictions from the Agri-Food Sector in Ethiopia and Ghana

SETH COOK [a], JIXIA LU [b], HENRY TUGENDHAT [c] and DAWIT ALEMU [d,*]
[a] *International Institute for Environment and Development, London, UK*
[b] *China Agricultural University, Beijing, PR China*
[c] *Institute of Development Studies (IDS), University of Sussex, Brighton, UK*
[d] *Ethiopian Institute of Agricultural Research, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia*

Summary. — This paper makes an empirical and ethnographic contribution to the literature on Chinese migrants in Africa by using five case studies to explore their role in the agri-food sector in Ethiopia and Ghana. We find that the realities of Chinese migrants in this sector matches neither popular media stereotypes of empire building and land grabbing, nor Chinese government narratives of South–South cooperation, technology transfer, and agricultural development. Far from being a "silent army" promoting larger Chinese state objectives, they operate independently and serve no agenda other than their own. Many migrants have little if any contact with the Chinese Embassy or other official Chinese presence in Africa. While none of our informants have received support from the Chinese government, they are nonetheless affected by government regulatory frameworks in African countries and their activities are shaped accordingly. The regulatory policy environment is very different in the two countries, and this has implications for the livelihood strategies of Chinese migrants. While the impacts of their presence on local development are modest overall, these impacts do appear to be positive in the sense that they are creating economic opportunities, both for themselves and for local people.

Keywords — Agri-food, Migrants, China, Africa, Ethiopia, Ghana

1. INTRODUCTION

The role of Chinese migrants in Africa—when viewed from the perspective of the agri-food sector—is poorly researched and understood. A micro-level view suggests, however, that it does not fit neatly into Western media stereotypes (land grabbing, empire building) or Chinese government discourses (South–South cooperation and technology transfer). This is not a state-driven phenomenon, but rather a story of individuals. This paper aims to make an empirical contribution by investigating—through five case studies—the role of Chinese migrants in the agri-food sector in two African countries—Ethiopia and Ghana. In so doing, we hope to challenge some prevailing narratives surrounding Chinese migrants and China's role in Africa, and to explore the implications for local development in these countries.

2. METHODOLOGY

Our research goal was to look beyond official Chinese government proclamations, as well as the dramatic allegations that characterize some of the media coverage of Chinese investment in Africa, to investigate what is actually happening on the ground. The only way to understand fully is to engage closely with migrants through individual case studies to examine their activities and motivations, their networks, the reasons they ended up in Africa and in the food sector, and overall to try to ascertain the impacts of their activities on local development.

The main methodologies used in both countries were semi-structured interviews and participant observation. A total of 45 interviews were conducted in Ethiopia, 43 of which were done during four periods of fieldwork between November 2013 and December 2014, complemented with another two interviews with informants based in China. Informants included officials from the Ethiopian Ministry of Agriculture; staff of the China-Ethiopia Agricultural Technology Demonstration Centre (ATDC); instructors at Alage Agricultural College; Chinese farmers, hotel managers, restaurant owners, entrepreneurs, local vegetable and meat vendors; and researchers at the Ethiopian Institute of Agricultural Research. In Ghana, 27 interviews were conducted during fieldwork in December 2013. Interviewees included Chinese farmers, supermarket owners, pesticide salespeople, staff of the Chinese Embassy, local farmers, local vegetable vendors, and staff of the Ghanaian Ministry of Agriculture. In addition to these longer interviews, there was also a much larger number of shorter interactions with Chinese, Ethiopians, and Ghanaians involved in the production, sale, and consumption of agricultural commodities. Interviews were conducted in Chinese, English, and Amharic depending on the preference of the informant and ease of communication.

In Ethiopia, Chinese migrants are involved in running restaurants, several retail food businesses, and some small farms. There is one Chinese company that has recently acquired land to grow rice and vegetables, and at least one other that is planning to invest in agriculture. In Ghana, the scope of food-related activities that Chinese migrants are involved in is much broader due to a more lenient regulatory environment (discussed in section 6). This includes running farms, restaurants, retail food shops, and supermarkets as well as input supply firms. There are also Chinese companies that grow some of their own produce for their Chinese staff, and Chinese food-processing companies producing snacks and

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drinks for the local market. Given the larger number of food sector businesses in Ghana, this paper only profiles a small number of them. Furthermore, the focus of this paper is on farms, shops, and other enterprises involved in marketing food and agricultural products, and hence there is only passing mention here of firms that are growing food solely for their own staff needs.

In each country, research involved multinational research teams. In Ghana, the team included two Chinese researchers fluent in English, a Chinese speaking researcher from the UK, and a Ghanaian university professor fluent in English. In Ethiopia, the team was comprised of a Chinese speaking American and an Ethiopian researcher from a government institute fluent in English and Amharic. The teams attempted to locate Chinese farmers and migrants involved in other parts of the food industry by triangulating between Investment Agency lists, regional tours conducted by local research assistants and *ad hoc* investigations, based on snowball sampling.

3. BACKGROUND: UNDERSTANDING CHINESE MIGRATION TO AFRICA

China is playing an influential role in the development path of African countries and its influence on the continent will continue to grow in tandem with rising trade and aid flows (Amanor & Chichava, 2016). Most of the literature on China–Africa relations focuses on state-level cooperation, as well as Chinese state-owned firms, which operate in tandem with state institutions and policy (Gu, Zhang, Mukwereza, & Amanor, 2016). However, there are also large numbers of Chinese migrants in Africa who are participating in local economies in various ways. What these people are doing, and the influence they are having on local development, is only recently beginning to be addressed in the literature (e.g., French, 2014; Mohan, Lampert, Tan-Mullins, & Chang, 2014), but the role of Chinese migrants in the agri-food sector is a neglected area. This section draws on the literature to explore what we know about Chinese migration trends in Africa, and to highlight the gaps.

(a) *Migration trends and data gaps*

The outward flow of Chinese migrants is a function of changes in China's political economic context. For the first three decades following the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, China's migration was tightly controlled. People either left the country to work on state-backed projects in developing countries abroad, or they left illegally (Fielding, 2015). In order to foster diplomatic relations with newly independent African states, Mao sent an estimated 150,000 workers and technicians to Africa to participate in agriculture, technology, and infrastructure projects, the vast majority of whom returned to China after completing their work (Park, 2009, p. 2). The 1978 reform and opening up period initially saw the gradual legal migration of researchers and students to Western universities and the illegal migration of largely poor people from Southeast China to North America and Western Europe. As economic growth continued, migration flows increased too and took on a global character as people moved to other parts of Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Although Chinese people have been going to Africa on state-to-state cooperation projects since the inception of the PRC in 1949 (Amanor & Chichava, 2016), it is only since the beginning of the 21st century that mainland Chinese have begun to migrate to Africa independently in significant numbers (Fielding, 2015).

Chinese migration to Ethiopia and Ghana has increased significantly in recent years, as Chinese companies have expanded their presence in the mining, construction, road building, hydropower, electricity, railroad, telecommunications, manufacturing, and other sectors. Data on the number of Chinese migrants in Africa are incomplete and unreliable, and these two countries are no exception. A source in the Ethiopian Embassy in Beijing indicated that there are 35,000–40,000 Chinese people living in Ethiopia.[1] A contact in the Chinese Embassy in Addis Ababa put that number at 20,000.[2]

As for Ghana, Mohan *et al.* (2014, pp. 20–21) estimate Chinese migrant numbers at anywhere between 7,000 and 20,000. They quote another source that puts this figure at between 6,000 and 10,000 (Marfaing & Thiel, 2011). However, *The Guardian* reported that 4,592 illegal Chinese gold miners were deported in June–July 2013 alone,[3] which indicates that the total number of Chinese migrants in Ghana is considerably higher than the other estimates. Previous studies of Chinese migrations to Ghana also chart the flow of people coming from Hong Kong (or through Hong Kong from mainland China) from the 1950s to 1970s, often setting up textile mills (Ho, 2008). Movements of Chinese migrants are not unidirectional in time or space, with migrants moving between countries and also splitting their time between countries in a highly flexible way. Additional factors include porous borders within Africa, corruption, and ineffectiveness within agencies responsible for border control and immigration. For these reasons, accurate figures on the Chinese presence in Africa are difficult to obtain and constantly in flux (Park, 2012).

Since the promulgation of China's Going Out Strategy in 1999, the Chinese government has been actively promoting the outward flow of companies and people, including in the agricultural sector. This has taken the form of general encouragement to Chinese companies that they should invest in African agriculture,[4] as well as state-to-state cooperation projects that bring in Chinese companies[5] (Gu *et al.*, 2016). There have also been increasing numbers of Chinese researchers and civil servants recommending that Chinese state agencies do more to facilitate the "going out" of Chinese companies into African agriculture (Jing & Li, 2011). And there have been reports of studies for the Chinese government that African agriculture could provide employment for up to 1 million Chinese laborers, and aid China's food security (Bezlova, 2009).

Several studies over the past decade have begun to look at the nature of Chinese migration across different African countries. These have given great insights into the diversity of actors, how they engage with local communities, as well as the push and pull factors which brought them to Africa in the first place (Mohan *et al.*, 2014; Guo Chatelard & Chu, 2014; Bräutigam, 2011). Between them, they show how Chinese migrants already engage in numerous forms of business, ranging from construction to trading and healthcare. Many of the migrants who have set up small businesses in Africa originally came over on large state-to-state projects, but family connections are now becoming more important, both in terms of bringing people out in the first place, as well as the functioning of businesses over time (Mohan *et al.*, 2014).

There are however very few studies focusing specifically on Chinese migrants' engagement in the agri-food sector in African countries. A notable exception is recent work on Chinese agricultural engagements in Zambia (Guo Chatelard & Chu, 2014), which has a particular focus on individual, private entrepreneurs rather than state-sponsored investments. This is complemented by another study from Zambia that traces the evolution of Chinese participation in Zambian agriculture from "agro-socialist" to "agro-capitalist" modes, and includes the role of Chinese commercial farmers (Yan & Sautman, 2010). While these studies deal exclusively with farms and not food sector businesses, Zambia provides an interesting contrast to Ethiopia and Ghana, particularly given the larger number of Chinese farmers there. A number of other studies have also touched upon Chinese migrant farming operations, as part of broader investigations into Chinese agricultural engagements (e.g., Bräutigam & Tang, 2012; Dobler, 2005; French, 2014). Our fieldwork in Ethiopia and Ghana builds upon these studies, while adding a comparative element that aims to highlight points of continuity and discontinuity across countries and sectors.

4. CHINESE MIGRANTS IN AFRICAN AGRICULTURE

Agricultural cooperation between China and African countries dates back to the 1960s, and has evolved in the decades since in tandem with changes in China's political economy (Amanor & Chichava, 2016; Tang, Li, & Qi, 2014). The model of large Chinese state-owned farms in the 1960s has since morphed into a mixture of aid, South–South cooperation and investment (Bräutigam & Tang, 2009). In terms of official cooperation between China and Ethiopia, there is a China-Ethiopia Agricultural Technology Demonstration Centre (ATDC) in Ginchi (Xu, Li, Qi, Tang, & Mukwereza, 2016), Chinese instructors are teaching at agricultural vocational colleges, Chinese agronomists are participating in FAO and other agricultural development projects, and Chinese experts are serving with the Ministry of Agriculture (Alemu, 2013; Alemu, Cook, & Qi, 2015). In Ghana, areas of agricultural cooperation have included irrigation, agro-processing, agricultural technology, infrastructure development, as well as the provision of Chinese agricultural experts to teach at the University of Ghana (Amanor, 2013).

Just as the information on Chinese migrants is patchy and unreliable, data on Chinese investment in the agricultural sector are incomplete and often inaccurate. For instance, spreadsheets obtained from the Ethiopian Investment Agency in March 2014 listed 39 Chinese investments in the agricultural sector in the period between October 1995 and December 2013. However, most of the phone numbers and email addresses of the contacts for these investments were no longer valid, and so their existence was impossible to confirm. Visits to the locations of some of these notional investments showed nothing on the ground. Several informants confirmed that many of these investments exist only on paper.

Despite a significant record of Chinese engagement in agriculture and rural development in Ethiopia since official diplomatic relations between the two nations began in 1970, there appear to be very few actual Chinese farms in Ethiopia, and none of them large scale. These findings are consistent with Bräutigam and Tang (2012), who found only one such farm. Our attempts to contact the Chinese investors listed revealed only two commercially operating farms: a 1-ha chicken farm called the Joy River Meat Company located in Butajira about 130 km from Addis Ababa, and a 10-ha vegetable farm located about 60 km outside of the capital. On the other hand, one large Chinese company we contacted in Ethiopia (CGC Overseas) is considering investments in the agricultural sector, and a second company (Sino Trust Investments Co.) is already in the early stages of investing in rice and vegetable production.

The situation in Ghana is similar. Data obtained from the Ghanaian Investment Promotion Centre in December 2013 listed 12 Chinese farms. However this list was inaccurate, as a number of operations could not be confirmed, and one vegetable farm was identified that was not listed. Some large Chinese companies such as China Geo, Sinohydro and China Railway Engineering Corporation have their own small vegetable and pig farms geared toward meeting the consumption needs of their own staff. [6] However, these are also not listed in the Ghanaian Investment Promotion Centre records. The main Chinese investments in Ghana's agricultural sector are in the provision of infrastructure, technical services, and input supplies (Amanor, 2013).

Agribusiness engagements—whether farms, input suppliers, or other agri-food value chain businesses—remain scarce. Chinese initiatives in agricultural production have tended to develop as sidelines to infrastructure developments (Amanor, 2013). Indeed, the only large-scale agricultural investment our fieldwork encountered was a construction company that was bidding for part of a 10,000-ha plot of land in the north of Ghana to grow rice. It was competing against a Brazilian firm that was interested in investing in the entire area, and at the time of research there was no decision as to which company, if any, would win the bid (see Amanor & Chichava, 2016). [7]

This dearth of farming activity is perhaps surprising in light of the total number of Chinese migrants in Ethiopia and Ghana. Many more Chinese migrants go into other sectors such as mining (particularly in Ghana), commerce, manufacturing, energy, construction, engineering, railroads, road building, telecoms and hydropower, often as part of larger commercial, state-backed investments. In fact, farming appears to be a relatively neglected sector for the Chinese in Africa generally, in spite of Western media and NGO reports of "land grabs". [8] Even in Zambia, where there are about half a dozen Chinese state-owned farms and approximately 30 Chinese private farms, "Chinese farms on the whole remain relatively small players in Zambia's evolving agricultural sector" (Guo Chatelard, 2014, p. 3). Moreover, all of those farms are geared toward meeting domestic demand rather than for export. Our research only found one export-oriented firm: a Qingdao-based Chinese enterprise with a processing plant in Addis Ababa that is exporting sesame back to China. The firm does not have a farm, but instead buys from local growers.

In the following section we offer two detailed profiles of Chinese farmers in Ethiopia and Ghana, which illustrate the small-scale, marginal and rather haphazard nature of Chinese investment in the agricultural sector in both countries, as well as its targeting of a Chinese rather than a local clientele.

(a) *Case 1: a reluctant farmer in Ethiopia* [9]

Tao [10] came to Ethiopia with his Chinese girlfriend, now wife, when they finished school at 19 years old. He is now 24 and they farm a 10-ha plot of land located an hour outside of Addis Ababa. We were greeted by two local farm workers who took us to meet Tao. He strode over to meet us and seemed very happy to take a break from his farm duties. He spoke fluent English and mentioned that he was very proud of this given that he finished his education after high school.

He showed us around his small farm, half of which was overgrown with tall grass as he had not decided what to plant. The other 5 ha of the farm was divided into three sections planted to Chinese vegetables. By the entrance of the farm was a metal shack where he slept whenever he did not want to drive back to his flat in the local town, 30 min away. He told us his wife was back in China because she was about to give birth. The farm was leased for Tao's wife by her father when he came to Ethiopia in search of business opportunities. Tao's father-in-law had set up a textile mill and accrued enough capital to be able to invest in this agricultural venture run by his daughter and son-in-law. The lease was taken over from an Indian investor who had failed to do much with the land, and who was found by Tao's father-in-law through a contact with the Ethiopian Investment Agency.

The original goal was to grow mandarin oranges, and they hired Chinese agricultural experts from Sichuan in 2011 to do so, but the venture failed. Tao joked that "they were clearly not the experts they said they were!". After a year, all Chinese staff except one went back to China. Today Tao and his wife grow vegetables—mainly Chinese radishes and cabbage—the seeds of which came from South Korea (picked up by his father-in-law while traveling there on business). He mainly sells to other Chinese and takes orders over the phone. He claims he has an advantage over many local growers when selling to the Chinese construction companies, because construction groups can only work in the dry season and are generally back home in the wet season. Although the dry season is also the hardest time to grow vegetables, he is able to overcome this because he has an irrigation system on his farm. He also takes produce into Addis Ababa once a week to sell in the Rwanda Market.

The farm employs four local farm workers, whom Tao consults (as well as neighboring Ethiopian farmers) on questions about Ethiopian climates or contexts. As Tao related to us:

> We knew nothing about farming before I came here... We grew up in Chengdu and never even went to a farm in China... We learnt everything from Baidu and Google! At first my radishes came out looking like ginseng roots, so I searched on Baidu for more information. It suggested I till the ground better before planting the seeds and now my radishes grow very well... I mainly grow radishes now because it's the only thing I can grow well! [11]

Tao apparently has good relations with other local farmers and sometimes engages with the local farmers' union. However, he said he does not involve himself in local politics and spoke with astonishment about how one nearby village burnt down a neighboring village over a feud.

Like other Chinese farmers we interviewed in both countries, he had not received any help from the Chinese government or the Chinese Embassy. Tao says his farm is not very profitable, and is currently able to persist in agriculture mainly because of backing from his wife's father. He admits he dislikes farming as it involves too much work, and yearns to give up agriculture for a more lucrative and less isolated trade based in the capital.

Tao's lack of agricultural experience prior to starting this farm is common (though not universal) among the Chinese farmers we met in both countries, and something that Guo Chatelard and Chu (2015) also observed in Zambia. His dislike of farming and determination to leave the agricultural sector for a more lucrative trade are also notable, and echo the life history of David Huang, one of the earliest Chinese farmers in Ethiopia (see Bräutigam and Tang, 2012, p. 15), who returned to China in 2013 to take a job with a Shenyang-based company. Clearly, migration patterns are not a one-way street—many Chinese migrants decide to return to China after a few years in Africa, and people shuttle back and forth, as in Tao's wife for giving birth, and his father-in-law for his textile business.

For Chinese migrants in both countries, farming does not appear to be an attractive profession for the long term. The next farmer profiled in Case 2 may be an exception in this regard, although he too illustrates the often circuitous route taken by Chinese migrants in both countries when investing in the agri-food sector, as well as their typical focus on a Chinese clientele.

(b) *Case 2: from Saipan to rural Ghana*

Mr. Wang is a man in his 50s with a weary look of someone who has been through a lot. He said he left China around the time of the Cultural Revolution (but did not want to talk about specifics), and had originally moved to the island of Saipan in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. He certainly does not represent the typical migration pattern of Chinese migrants in Africa, but he had clearly maintained good networks as he was surrounded by Chinese migrants who had come straight from China and were partners of his in this vegetable farming enterprise.

When he first arrived in Ghana in 2005, he surveyed five different plots of land before choosing his current two hectare plot. He set up his farm that same year, having agreed to rent it for ten years at a total cost of USD $30,000. He negotiated with the local chief rather than the local government for this land, explaining that although Ghanaian land laws are very vague, he is confident his title deeds are secure. When Wang first arrived, he found customers by walking around the center of Accra, approaching Chinese people and asking if they were interested in buying vegetables. Over time, he and his partners have built up a list of 60 customers who order food deliveries from them over the phone. Selling directly to customers makes his vegetables cheaper than those in the Chinese supermarkets; however they are still too expensive for most Ghanaian customers. Furthermore, despite not having received any direct support from the Chinese government, the Chinese Embassy is now one of the farm's customers.

As a result of selling mainly to Chinese customers, Mr. Wang and his partners do not depend on Ghanaian networks as much as other vendors might. However, they still need to maintain good relations with the local chief regarding their use of the land, and the farm employs 12 local laborers. According to Mr. Wang, and the other managers of the small Chinese farms in Ghana that we visited, they were able to attract and retain local workers by paying wages on time, and sometimes in advance in order to meet workers' urgent social needs. Generating employment for local workers and the timely and flexible payment of wages can be seen as a positive contribution that these Chinese farms are making to the local economy, while also contributing new and diverse agricultural products to the local markets.

(c) *The reality of Chinese migrant farmers in Africa*

These case study farms, as well as other farms run by Chinese migrants in both countries, stand in contrast to official Chinese rhetoric of China–Africa agricultural cooperation, which focuses on China's modernized agricultural sector, advanced techniques and mechanized large-scale farming practices. The rather rudimentary farming methods that prevail in these small farms are similar to smallholder farming practices in China, and primarily consist of using organic manure for fertilizer, manual labor and a greater reliance on natural resources than on modern machinery and technology. There is little chance of these farms becoming large-scale, highly mechanized or capital intensive. Their production is not for export but entirely focused on meeting the needs of a local niche market, which consists primarily of Chinese (and other Asian) customers.

Relatively few Chinese migrants to Ghana and Ethiopia have taken the path of Tao and Wang though. What then explains the small number of Chinese farms? Informants in both countries offered similar explanations. As the head of a large Chinese conglomerate in Ghana who had been researching agriculture in the country for over five years explained, "agriculture requires a sustained effort, one or two years are not enough. In addition, Ghana has land (tenure) problems. If you start farming in a careless manner, later you may face lawsuits".[12] The owner of a Chinese restaurant in Addis Ababa touched upon many of the same issues:

> In the past there were Chinese people involved in growing vegetables, but it's difficult and tiring work, and doesn't make much money. Chinese investors are looking for a quicker return. Locals are also afraid that too many Chinese will come here, and invest too much money.[13]

He also mentioned that establishing a farm requires dealing with the government, and that "Chinese people don't like to have to deal with so much trouble, and so they don't bother." Land issues appear to be major obstacles to Chinese farmers in both countries; both because of the difficulty of locating suitable land, and land tenure complications once a plot is selected. Other reasons include poor rural infrastructure and better opportunities in other sectors. In the case of farms, the majority were established by individuals with little or no previous farming experience. They learned by trial and error, and many were not successful. In fact, farmers we interviewed in Ghana contended that far more Chinese farms failed than succeeded. Those who remain in the sector are the survivors, and they face the constant challenge of securing land rights.[14]

In addition to these factors, there are larger issues of risk and competitiveness that may be restricting Chinese investment in African agriculture. As a leading economist with China Exim Bank observes, "market volatility represents a major risk for Chinese investment in African agriculture" (cited in Buckley, 2013, p. 15). The same informant also observed that another challenge is competition with Western agribusiness operators: "Chinese companies are still in the early stage of global supply chain management, so are not able to compete with Western companies" (Buckley, 2013, p. 17). Market risk and competition are two factors that all entrepreneurs have to face; in the next section we turn our attention to the struggles of Chinese entrepreneurs in the agri-food sector as they try to move up the value chain.

5. CHINESE MIGRANTS IN AFRICA'S AGRI-FOOD VALUE CHAINS

In contrast to the stereotype of the successful Chinese entrepreneur in Africa (Mohan *et al.*, 2014), many Chinese migrants in the agri-food sector in both countries struggle to make a living amidst considerable hardship, whether in farming, retail or trading. Even where successful, migrants have had to overcome significant obstacles, as the following three case studies illustrate.

(a) *Case 3: selling vegetables in Addis Ababa*

Ms. Tang is an energetic 24-year old from Dalian in Liaoning Province who runs a vegetable shop in Addis Ababa. Her shop is on the edge of the Rwanda Market, which is the primary market in Addis for Chinese companies and restaurants to obtain meat and Chinese vegetables for their kitchens. She sources her vegetables from the Agricultural Technology Demonstration Centre as well as local growers. Ms. Tang's shop is medium sized and minimally decorated, with large burlap sacks on the floor near the front entrance overflowing with carrots, eggplant, potatoes, peppers and other vegetables. Bins full of every conceivable kind of Chinese vegetable line the walls of the shop. Business is brisk, as is clear from the trucks constantly pulling up outside to buy her vegetables, tofu and pork. Most of her customers are large Chinese firms doing business in Ethiopia, as well as some restaurants. The Chinese companies buy in bulk for their cafeterias, as Chinese vegetables are not available from most markets. "There are more and more Chinese here," she says, "so business is good".[15] But she also complains about the restrictions on doing business in Ethiopia, theft by local people, as well as arbitrary tax and legal rules. "The legal system here is not well developed. The tax system is not sound. This country didn't even have a proper customs (system) ten years ago!"[16]

On the other hand, an official we interviewed at the Ministry of Trade confirmed that Ethiopian regulations do not allow foreigners to engage in any wholesaling and retailing activities, and the ministry is not aware of the procedures that Ms. Tang followed to operate her vegetable retailing business. In fact, the few Chinese shop owners in Ethiopia go into business with local partners, who obtain the business license on their behalf. She has had her shop closed three times by the authorities and faces frequent visits from government inspectors who she claims are trying to supplement their meagre incomes by imposing fines.

(b) *Case 4: building an input supply business in Ghana*

Chinese engagements in wider agri-food value chains include not only the production, sale and processing of agricultural products, but also the supply of inputs. Agrochemicals have become an important business opportunity, particularly in Ghana (Yu, Lu, Tugendhat, & Li, 2015).

Ms. Yao works for her family business, "Five Continents", set up by her father in Ghana in 2006. They currently have two family members in Accra (her and her brother) and another two in Kumasi, all selling agrochemical products (pesticides and fertilizers) bought from manufacturers in China. Their father set up the company because he had heard that agrochemicals could be sold tax-free in Ghana. However, their business has been suffering lately from increased competition with Ghanaian traders who are now increasingly buying straight from the manufacturers in China.

Ms. Yao asked why the Chinese state did not offer more support to Chinese entrepreneurs abroad. She explained:

> Our profit margins are roughly 5 per cent and the exchange rates are not stable. It is impossible to convert Cedi directly to RMB, you have to convert into US dollars first. And since the Cedi has declined in value lately, more and more Chinese traders in leather, shoes, small goods, etc. have been forced to close up and move back to China. But at least there are no restrictions on quantities of currency we can take home.[17]

Life is clearly tough as they have virtually no social interactions in Accra outside of work. She told us she overcame this by reconnecting with school friends over the Internet lately. She also told us that:

> Recently there has been more antagonism toward Chinese citizens in Ghana since the Chinese gold miners were kicked out. This is especially so up in Kumasi where the miners were operating and is also home to the largest agricultural chemicals market. Nowadays I don't stay out late, whereas before it was safer.[18]

Ms. Yao has a good relationship with her Ghanaian neighbors and her business would not have functioned without local partners. We met in the shop opposite their office, and were offered drinks by the shop-owners as her guests. Five Continents products were displayed at the entrance of the shop that would normally have just sold daily necessities such as shampoo, newspapers and soft drinks. The only other place Five

Continents sold their products on the street was at one of the main marketplaces in Accra, operated by two Ghanaians on their behalf. We sat round a table to the side of the shop—her relationship with the shop owners suggested this was a normal place for her to meet people that came on business.

Ms. Yao's operation is in stark contrast to the highly successful Chinese agrochemicals group, Wynca Sunshine. Wynca Sunshine entered the Ghanaian market a decade ago, and is now the largest company of its kind, having surpassed the formerly dominant British and Israeli companies in terms of market share.[19] With Ghana as its hub in West Africa, the company now distributes to Nigeria, Mali, and Côte d'Ivoire, with a view to expanding further. It is also the first overseas agrochemical firm to have established its own bottling plant in Ghana, employing roughly 100 staff. In Wynca Sunshine, Ms. Yao sees potential for her business, but she admits she has a way to go.

(c) *Case 5: two restauranteurs in Ethiopia*

Many migrants were originally attached to large companies, and later branched out on their own once they became aware of the opportunities this sector offered. For example, Mr. Fu, a short, stocky 44-year old from Dujiangyan in Sichuan Province, was a former cook in an aeronautics company. He was sent by his firm to Dubai before being transferred to Ethiopia. After half a year at his firm in Ethiopia, he left to start his own business selling pork and fresh fish. He claims to be the only person in Addis Ababa who sells live fish. Later on he also opened his own restaurant specializing in fresh fish and Lanzhou style dishes. Mr. Fu works closely with local brokers (*delalas*) who link him to anything he needs to obtain, including house and car rental, hiring of workers, suppliers of live fish, etc. Moreover, he was able to ensure his stay and operate his own business through his marriage to an Ethiopian woman that was also facilitated by a *delala*.[20] His local wife obtained the business license allowing him to operate legally.

Through Mr. Fu we met Mr. Li, a former truck driver in his 40s from Jilin province. Mr. Li is a balding, burly man with a dark complexion and a ready smile. He came to Ethiopia in February 2014 on an invitation from Mr. Fu, who knew a friend of his in China. Mr. Fu needed help with his live fish shop, and also to start his new restaurant. At the time, the two had never met, and only saw each other in person for the first time when Li arrived in Addis. By September 2014, Li had already started his own hot pot restaurant not far from Mr. Fu's venue. In explaining his decision to come to Ethiopia and to enter the food sector, Li observed that: "China doesn't have many blank spaces, whereas here there are many".[21] What he meant was that virtually every business opportunity in China has already been exploited, whereas in Africa there are ample untapped opportunities waiting to be developed.

6. DISCUSSION

What then do these five cases tell us about the contributions of Chinese migrants to the African agri-food sector in two countries? How can then they help separate facts from fiction? Popular representations in the Western media concerning China's expanding presence in Africa often suggest that China is building a new empire on the continent. One example of this imperial narrative and the role of Chinese migrants within it is given in Cardenal and Araújo (2013, p. 5):

> China's expansion would not be what it is today without the support of millions of anonymous people who brave prejudice and uncertainty to set up businesses in the most unlikely places around the planet. China benefits from an army of astonishing human beings with a limitless capacity for self-sacrifice, who venture out into the world driven only by their dreams of success and who go to conquer impossible markets Westerners never dared to tackle—or if they did, they failed.

While Cardenal and Araújo (2013, p. xiii) speak of "a silent army" of "tireless entrepreneurs" who are venturing to the African continent and other places to conquer new markets, Chinese government narratives point instead to possibilities for "South–South cooperation" and generating "win–win" solutions to problems of development in Africa. Specifically in the agri-food sector, Chinese official discourses stress the capacity of Chinese technology to raise agricultural productivity and enhance food security in Africa (Buckley, 2013).

What we observed on the ground matches none of the narratives surrounding the Chinese in Africa. Far from being a "silent army" promoting China's interests in Africa, Chinese migrants in the agri-food sector in Ethiopia and Ghana are mostly independent actors with little or no support from or even contact with the Chinese government. They serve no larger agenda and are simply trying to eke out a living and make a profit under often arduous circumstances. Most end up in this sector by circumstance rather than by pre-determined plan, and many fail along the way. Nor do they necessarily end up staying in Africa permanently, as quite a few eventually return to China.

While there are some exceptions, the majority of the migrants in our study are not particularly wealthy, yet compared to China, Africa is still seen as a place of opportunity.

(a) *Africa as opportunity*

The theme of "Africa as opportunity", also highlighted by Mohan *et al.* (2014), is as true of Ethiopia and Ghana as anywhere else in Africa. For many migrants, Africa offers them prospects that do not exist back in China. As the vegetable shop owner Ms. Tang put it: "I have a lot of opportunities here. Maybe in a few years I can go to the UK, or to another country. I haven't thought of returning to China. If I returned, I would just have to find a job".[22] Ms. Tang moved to Ethiopia two years ago at the request of a friend in the construction business who needed her help. Now she is already a successful entrepreneur running her own business, whereas in China she would have to work for someone else. Many Chinese migrants tend to come to Ethiopia and Ghana for other kinds of work, but end up in the agri-food sector after seeing the opportunities it offers. Most of our informants in farming had no experience in that sector; they learned by doing, or from the Internet.

Several of our informants got into the agri-food sector because local food markets could not meet the demand for Chinese vegetables. In Ghana, the main local staples are cassava, yam, cocoyam, and plantain, which are unfamiliar to the Chinese. In the past there were very limited types of vegetables available for the Chinese community, and this gap in local markets inspired Chinese entrepreneurs to start growing and selling vegetables. It is this combination of increased demand and promising business opportunities, coupled with entrepreneurial initiative on the part of Chinese migrants, that has resulted in the growth of food sector businesses in Ghana and Ethiopia. Another factor may be the competitive advantage they have in Africa given their connections with China and their skills in specialized cooking (in the case of restauranteurs) and food production. An example of the latter are the tofu producers in Ethiopia, who have cornered the market on a specialty item.

A number of informants cited the many "blank spaces" in the market waiting to be exploited as a pull factor for moving to Africa, along with the fact that it does not require much capital to start a business. These combined with the push factor of tough competition back home. As a hotel manager in Addis Ababa observed: "in China it's very difficult to do business. The market there is already saturated".[23] This is a sentiment that we heard again and again. As another Chinese entrepreneur lamented:

> In China's domestic market, pressure is intense, and so (we) choose the foreign market. Because with Chinese, the ideas you have, have already been implemented by others. You can only choose those areas where you are stronger or more advanced than others, otherwise you will fail. Competition at home is too intense, and there's no shortage of hands because mechanization has replaced human labor. The market is already saturated.[24]

Other migrants came to Africa with family members. As one young Chinese farmer from a Hunanese family related to us:

> My father was an engineer repairing machinery in a Ghanaian enterprise, and my mother and I also stayed here. I studied in Ghana until graduation from high school. I planned to go to the UK for college, but I gave up because we could not afford to pay the high tuition fees. Then I took over the business from my parents. Before the farm, they had run a Chinese restaurant.[25]

For this young farmer, he had not chosen to come to Ghana, but he did choose to stay and help with the family business.

For some informants, the main motivation for going to Africa was simply the desire to make money. As one Chinese entrepreneur in Ethiopia put it, "frankly speaking, I'm here to make money. (We) go wherever money can be made".[26] For those migrants with families, this is not simply for oneself, but rather to support one's family and improve their economic circumstances. This often entails frequent travel back and forth between China and Africa. For these migrants, "potential short- and medium-term financial gains appear to outweigh very real dangers and difficulties" (Park, 2009, p. 15).

However, for many migrants it is not merely a question of making money. The theme of wanting to go out to improve oneself, to see the wider world, came up repeatedly in conversations with Chinese migrants, just as has been noted by other studies of Chinese migrants in Africa (e.g., French, 2014; Mohan *et al.*, 2014). As one informant commented:

> The first reason (for going out) is that we've already been in China a long time. Second, we hope to go outside China to improve ourselves and so sought an opportunity. It's rare to be able to go outside China with an opportunity of this kind; some opportunities come by chance, not by seeking, you just happen upon them. It's not like you can go just because you want to.[27]

Across our informants, there was a large diversity of migrant pathways, and chains of arrival. In many ways every story was different. What is clear however is that the growing numbers of Chinese migrants in Africa reflect the fact that many people want to leave China, as they have for centuries. A combination of push and pull factors are now providing people with opportunities to go to Africa, and many are taking those opportunities. However, the process is very rarely calculated and clear, whether at the highest level of "going out" policymakers, or at the individual level of the migrants described here. As the last quote indicates, it is a combination of agency on the part of migrants and pure chance interacting in complex and unpredictable ways that brings these migrants to Africa.

Much is dependent on networks—both for arrival, but also for subsequent success. Studies of Chinese migrants (e.g., Dobler, 2005; Mohan & Kale, 2007; Ong, 1993) have noted that family ties lie at the core of transnational networks among the Chinese diaspora. Kinship ties are clearly also key for many Chinese migrants in Ethiopia and Ghana in the operation of their food sector businesses. Whether they are in the restaurant sector, in retail or in farming, Chinese migrants in Ghana and Ethiopia rely on their social networks—known as *guanxi* in Chinese—to do business. These networks can take the form of kinship relations (*xueyuan guanxi*), regional affinities (*diyuan guanxi*), friendships or work colleagues.

In China class lines are more clearly drawn, and people tend to socialize with those of similar means, whereas in Africa social relations are more fluid because everyone is thrown together in the same Chinese diaspora community. In this context, food becomes an important means for Chinese to connect with each other and strengthen the bonds among the diaspora community. For instance, food markets are places for Chinese people from different backgrounds to meet and make connections. Chinese farmers also give specialty foods, which are scarce commodities in Africa, to companies or to people in the Chinese Embassy as gifts to foster friendly ties and build their social networks.

(b) *Unofficial business: Chinese migrants' interactions with the Chinese Embassy*

By being mostly small-scale and "under the radar", Chinese migrant-run enterprises in the agriculture and food sectors in both Ethiopia and Ghana remain outside the context of official bilateral cooperation. Even where they have contact with the Chinese Embassy, none of our informants reported receiving any significant support from the Chinese government and instead rely entirely on their own resources. As the owner of a Chinese restaurant put it:

> A small business like this one is hardly worth mentioning. For large scale investments, the government has to get involved. The government doesn't have the time to get involved in small scale enterprises—they don't have time, so business people have to rely solely on their own resources. Of course, in case of trouble, we have to go to the Embassy![28]

While Chinese businesses in the food and agriculture sector appear not to have received any direct aid from the Chinese government, the presence of the Embassy does exercise some influence, simply because of China's powerful status in Africa. As one informant pointed out:

> Imperceptibly, there is a kind of help. If there wasn't an Embassy, then your restaurant wouldn't be in a good position. Because of foreign policies. . .relatively speaking, China is a big and strong country, and people outside may respect Chinese people more (for this reason), just like with America. Whether or not there is any help (from the Embassy), imperceptibly, there is a kind of influence.[29]

And Embassy personnel are often well known and connected. Food again becomes the link. Restaurant owners are particularly familiar with Embassy personnel, who often patronize their establishments. As one restaurant owner observed:

> Embassy people come here, so I know them. After all, we are all Chinese people. As Chinese, the Embassy are leaders and they are responsible for us, and the Embassy is concerned about what we are doing here, and hope that we are doing our business well.[30]

In this sense, if Chinese businesses are doing well and abiding by locals laws, it reflects well on the Embassy; if not, it reflects poorly upon them.

(c) *Local regulations shape migrant opportunities*

While none of our informants have received support from the Chinese government, they are nonetheless affected by government regulatory frameworks in African countries and their activities are shaped accordingly. However, the regulatory policy environment is very different in the two countries, and this has implications for the livelihood strategies of Chinese migrants. In Ghana, the links between production, retail and restaurants are much more developed, and this relates to the different forms of engagement and the different regulatory environment. While there are many Chinese shops (both wholesale and retail) in large cities in Ghana—including supermarkets run by entrepreneurs who also run farms—this is not the case in Ethiopia. The Ethiopian government restricts the operation of retail and wholesale businesses by foreigners, and these regulations are enforced, at least to some extent. This is in line with Ethiopia's commitment to a "developmental state" approach, whereby foreign investment and donor support are carefully channeled and controlled to meet development objectives (Alemu and Scoones, 2013; Kelsall, 2013). The regulations on retail and wholesale business are not directed at Chinese investors specifically, but rather at carving out an exclusive space for domestic businesses in the context of expanding foreign investment in the country. However, they have the effect of restricting certain forms of Chinese investment, which in turn is having an impact on the manner in which commercial relations between Chinese and Ethiopians are unfolding. The result is that a degree of vertical integration of food businesses exists in Ghana that is not possible in Ethiopia, where only locals have such opportunities.

While vertical integration is not feasible for Chinese migrants in Ethiopia, some still manage to operate wholesale and retail businesses, as the cases of Ms. Tang and Mr. Fu illustrate. Our research revealed two ways by which this occurs. The first is by using legal modes of investment such as hotels and restaurants, and then opening a shop therein. The second is by working with locals (the license is owned by the local person while the business is owned by the Chinese side), including contractual marriages to obtain residence and business permits. The second mode appears to be the most common. For instance, Mr. Fu (Case 5) operates his live fish business through a retailing license owned by his wife. This arrangement was facilitated by the *delala* (local broker) who operates next to his shop. Thus another effect of the regulatory environment in Ethiopia is that it forces Chinese migrants to develop business partnerships with Ethiopians that might not have existed otherwise.

(d) *Chinese migrants create their own market dynamics*

One key characteristic of Chinese businesses in the agri-food sector in both Ghana and Ethiopia is that they tend to be small private enterprises.[31] This means that they must rely entirely on their own resources and cannot fall back on the deeper pockets of a corporate operation if their business ventures fail. In Ghana, a decline in the market for Chinese foods caused by the departure of thousands of Chinese migrant laborers (due to the mining conflict in June 2013) presents real challenges for the future viability of Chinese small farms and businesses further up the value chain. All businesses confirmed that their sales and incomes have declined as a result. Links to on-going Chinese investment—notably construction—are crucial to sustain demand for specialty foods, such as the Chinese vegetables produced on Tao's and Wang's farms profiled earlier, and sold at Ms. Tang's shop.

This is what Mohan *et al.* (2014, p. 83) call an "ethnic economy", whereby businesses target their goods and services toward a Chinese clientele, including other Chinese firms. In Ghana, local people tend not to buy Chinese vegetables, hence Chinese farms and supermarkets focus on the Chinese market, as well as other Asians such as Indians and Koreans. Similarly, the Agricultural Technology Demonstration Centre (ATDC) in Ethiopia sells their meat and vegetables primarily through Ms. Tang's shop in Addis, and to Chinese companies operating in their vicinity. Certain Chinese restaurants have a predominantly Chinese clientele. As one Chinese restauranteur in Addis explained, business people like himself are really aiming at the Chinese market in countries like Ethiopia that have a substantial Chinese population, as local people do not have much purchasing power. However, this is by no means exclusively the case. Chinese shops in Ethiopia also sell to locals, as do Chinese farms such as the Joy River Meat Company, and some Chinese restaurants attract a substantial local clientele. The number of Chinese restaurants in Accra has grown in recent years to meet the rising demand of Ghanaian middle and upper classes for Chinese food (Mohan *et al.*, 2014, p. 84).

On the consumer side, the stereotype that Chinese only like to buy from Chinese—which was a common complaint of local food vendors in Ethiopia—does not hold up. While there are certainly examples of this, we also found many counter-examples. The owner of a hot pot restaurant in Addis Ababa explained how he chose produce based on price and quality:

> I don't go to a particular place every time. There are many shops. I go to whichever one has the freshest meat and produce. The prices are all about the same. If it's not very fresh, we can't use it. For hot pot, everything has to be fresh, or customers won't come. I don't necessarily buy from Chinese vendors; most of the shops are run by locals.[32]

In Ghana, we found that distance and price are the two key considerations for Chinese consumers. Among all of the potential markets for Chinese to buy vegetables, local farms are the most attractive. Provided with a local farm nearby, Chinese migrants would buy vegetables there due to the lower prices. The second best option is the local open market, where they can possibly buy some Chinese vegetables and meat (beef, mutton and fish) at a lower price than they would find at Chinese supermarkets. Overall, this contradicts the common stereotype that Chinese only like to buy from Chinese. At the same time, it also underscores the difficulties faced by Chinese small farmers in Ghana, who face stiff competition both from other Chinese farmers and from Ghanaian farmers who can produce the same foods at a lower cost.

(e) *Implications for local development*

What then are the implications of the Chinese presence in the food and agricultural sector for development in each country? In spite of the contrasts between Ghana and Ethiopia, we found several common themes that have been highlighted throughout the paper. First, Chinese entrepreneurs are present mostly as marginal players, despite the media hype. There are very few Chinese farms in particular, and this appears to be true for most other African countries as well. While we did find several larger Chinese firms involved in food sector businesses, the majority are small-scale.

Second, Chinese food businesses in both countries are creating economic opportunities, both for themselves and for locals, and in some cases they are competing more with other Chinese than with Africans, especially in the restaurant sector. They are contributing diverse new food products to local markets, employing local people and generating local tax revenue, and in this sense, their impacts appear to be positive overall.

Moreover, the presence of large numbers of Chinese in both countries—concentrated in the capital cities and large market centers—has created demand for food products that everyone is responding to.

These opportunities may expand further—informants from several large Chinese construction and engineering companies expressed interest in the investment opportunities in agriculture. Even though such large firms are not currently central to the sector, they are nonetheless often the reason that many Chinese came to Africa in the first place, and have been crucial in creating demand for particular agricultural commodities and foods, which in turn has generated commercial opportunities in this sector for both locals and Chinese.

7. CONCLUSIONS

Most of the research to date on Chinese agricultural engagement in Africa focuses on agricultural aid, state-level cooperation, and investments by large-scale enterprises. The role of Chinese migrants in the food and farming sector in Africa is a neglected area. Seen from the perspective of Chinese migrants in the agri-food sector in Ethiopia and Ghana, the notion that China is building a new empire in Africa does not match empirical reality. Most are independent entrepreneurs promoting their own interests alone, with no support from the Chinese state and in many cases, little contact with it either. For the most part, they are not transferring technology, enhancing food security, promoting agricultural development, or grabbing land. Their production and marketing efforts mostly target niche markets, particularly other Chinese.

At the same time, this situation may be partly a function of the small Chinese presence in the agri-food sector, at least so far. If one were to examine other sectors where there are large numbers of migrants (e.g., mining in Ghana) or where state-owned enterprises predominate (e.g., hydropower), one might draw different conclusions. Every sector is different and it is unwise to make sweeping generalizations about the Chinese presence on the continent.

NOTES

1. Interview, Chinese employee of Ethiopian Embassy, Beijing, March 20, 2014.

2. Interview, Chinese employee of Chinese Embassy in Ethiopia, December 20, 2014.

3. http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/15/ghana-deports-chinese-goldminers.

4. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Africa desk chief: http://www.tianong.cn/153/view-69698-0-0.html.

5. Examples of these projects can be found in the Declarations and Programmes published after each of the five meetings of the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation: http://www.focac.org/eng/.

6. Since the focus of our research in the agri-food sector was on farms, shops and other enterprises involved in marketing food and agricultural products, and these firms are only growing food for their own staff needs, we did not visit their facilities.

7. Interview, Ghanaian employee at China Geo-Engineering Corporation, Accra, December 12th, 2013.

8. For one example of the ‘land grab’ literature pertaining to China, see GRAIN (2008). For a thorough refutation of the Chinese ‘land grab’ hypothesis, see Bräutigam (2015). For an overview of the situation pertaining to ‘land grab’ in Africa, see Cotula (2013) and Oya (2013).

9. This farm was only located by chance when the author happened to meet a local man purchasing vegetables at the gate of the Agricultural Technology Demonstration Centre in Ginchi. The farm was not listed on the Ethiopian Investment Agency list at the time of research. One of the authors visited the first farm along with a colleague in September 2014.

10. All names in this article are pseudonyms, except David Huang, who has already been cited in Bräutigam and Tang (2012), p. 15.

11. Interview, Chinese farmer, Ethiopia, October 7, 2014.

12. Interview, Chinese company manager, Ghana, December 2, 2013.

13. Interview, Chinese restaurant owner, Addis Ababa, November 25, 2013.

14. Ghana’s land laws are fraught with internal tensions, largely due to the inheritance of the colonial system that deferred control of property rights to local chiefs (Amanor, 2005).

15. Interview, shopkeeper, Rwanda Market, Addis Ababa, March 20 2014.

16. Interview, shopkeeper, Rwanda Market, Addis Ababa, December 12, 2014.

17. Interview, agro-chemical company employee, Ghana, December 2, 2013.

18. Interview, agro-chemical company employee, Ghana, December 2, 2013.

19. Interview, Chinese manager at Wynca Sunshine Group, Ghana, December 5, 2013.

20. In Ethiopia, there are two types of marriage arrangements. One is a full wife and husband arrangement, which implies 50–50 ownership of all family resources. The second is based on a contract that states what proportion of family resources are shared. In the case of Mr. Fu, he has a marriage arrangement which specifies payment of a given amount of money to his wife, which in this case is paid monthly like a salary. The *delala* was paid a one-off fee for his facilitation of the marriage.

21. Interview, Chinese restaurant owner, Addis Ababa, March 18, 2014.

22. Interview, shopkeeper, Rwanda Market, Addis Ababa, December 12, 2014.

23. Interview, Chinese hotel manager, Addis Ababa, March 17, 2014.

24. Interview, Chinese restaurant owner, Addis Ababa, December 7, 2014.

25. Interview, Chinese farmer, Ghana, December 20, 2013.

26. Interview, Chinese entrepreneur, December 6, 2014.

27. Interview, ATDC staff member, Ethiopia, December 11, 2014.

28. Interview, Chinese restaurant owner, Addis Ababa, December 7, 2014.

29. Interview, Chinese entrepreneur, Addis Ababa, December 6, 2014.

30. Interview, Chinese restaurant owner, Addis Ababa, December 7, 2014.

31. Our research did find one large enterprise in Ghana, the Wynca Sunshine Group. In Ethiopia, we found two Chinese companies which are either considering or already in the process of investing in the agri-food sector. However, the majority of cases that we found in both countries consisted of small enterprises, whether farms, restaurants or retail shops.

32. Interview, Chinese entrepreneur, Addis Ababa, December 7, 2014.

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