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Research Report

Adaptation of Chinese Immigrants in Zambia

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POLICY POINTS

African governments should

note that Chinese have a profile different from other investors, yet Chinese levels of adaptation in Africa are higher than commonly reported.

Chinese entities need to do

more to prepare Chinese to localize in Africa, mitigate an emergence of Chinatowns, and connect Africans studying in China with Chinese firms in Africa.

Third parties should

acknowledge that the claim of “Chinese self-isolation” is part of an effort to misdirect conceptions of African/Chinese interaction.

Adaptation of Chinese Immigrants in Zambia

Lu Yao, Barry Sautman, Yan Hairong, and Zhou Weixuan

CHARACTERIZING CHINESE AS BEING PRONE to self-isolation is essentially the same as casting them as ethnocentric—not wanting to associate with locals. Such statements implicate the Chinese identity as central to this behavior; implicit in this claim is an assumption that other non-indigenous people do not self-isolate. The media frequently takes this approach. Whether Chinese immigrants in Africa integrate or localize in host states is debated in academic circles as well. Some scholars claim that Chinese enterprises have achieved significant localization; others hold that the Chinese tend to live isolated from local society and leave open the reasons for this trend, allowing that ethnocentricity may be a cause.¹

There is, however, no evidence that Chinese are particularly ethnocentric. In fact, some studies actually indicate the opposite. A University of Maryland survey in 16 countries found that Chinese are the second greatest supporters of “equal treatment for different races and ethnicities” and of rejecting employers’ rights to discriminate, with one of the largest majorities favoring government anti-discrimination action.² Furthermore, American and Chinese scholars who used a psychological measure of ethnocentricity found Kansas university students to be much more ethnocentric than their Chinese peers.³

In Africa, one factor that contributes to the widespread belief that Chinese self-isolate is the fact that some Chinese, especially those working on infrastructure, mining, or oil projects, live collectively on worksites or in compounds. These arrangements are not necessarily the choice of the individuals; their firms may require it for safety reasons. Yet, both studies and anecdotal evidence suggest that the Chinese may be less prone to self-isolation than other “expats” in Africa. For example, many white South Africans living in Tanzania tend to self-isolate and “are often accused of importing racism from home. This includes establishing exclusive schools, social clubs and resorting to the use of violence against Tanzanian laborers.”⁴

Although it seems unlikely that the purported Chinese self-isolation results from extreme ethnocentricity, the degree to which Chinese adequately adapt to African countries remains unanswered. Our survey offers some insight to begin answering this question by examining the level of adaptation of Chinese immigrants in Zambia.

Table 1: HKUST and PMRC survey results

Variables	HKUST Survey (n=624)	PMRC Survey (n=1,000)
Male	73%	71.3%
Age	33.3 years (10.0)	30-34 years
Education		
High school or below	19.2%	14.7%
Some college or university	66.3%	73%
Master or PhD	14.5%	5.6%
Number of relatives in Zambia	2.5 (5.4)	
Years lived in Zambia	4.1 years (4.7)	1-5 years
Communicate in English	81.9%	81.1%
Enterprise type		
State-owned enterprise	36%	
Private enterprise	64%	
Communication issues with local staff		
Many	10%	
Some	64%	
None	26%	
Speak local language (Bemba, Nyanja, etc)		
Few words	58%	
Few sentences	31%	
Work language	11%	

SURVEY

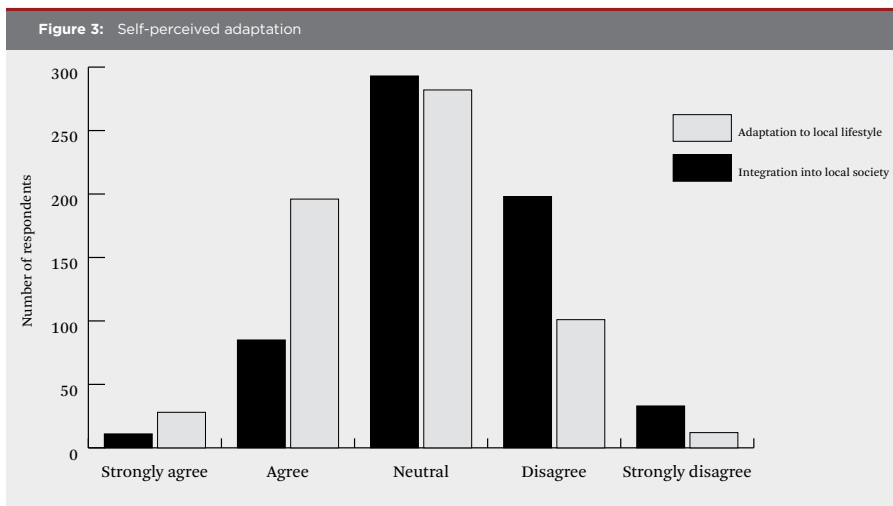
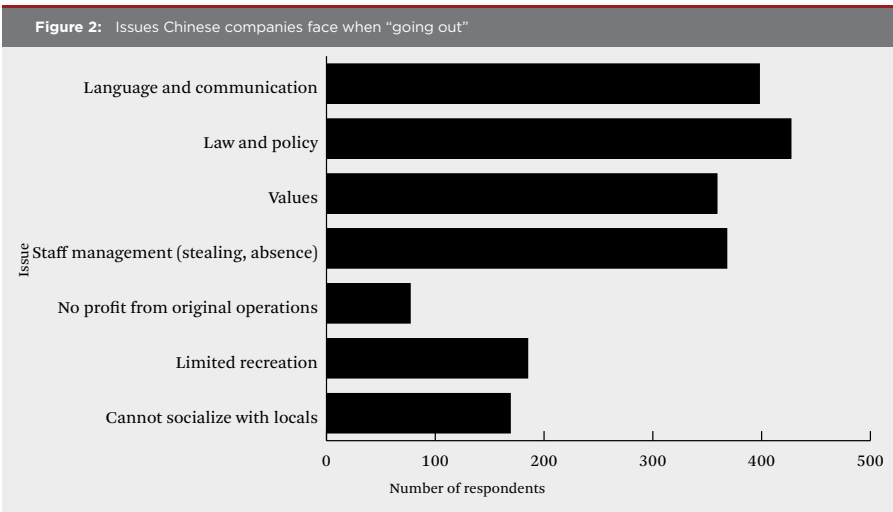
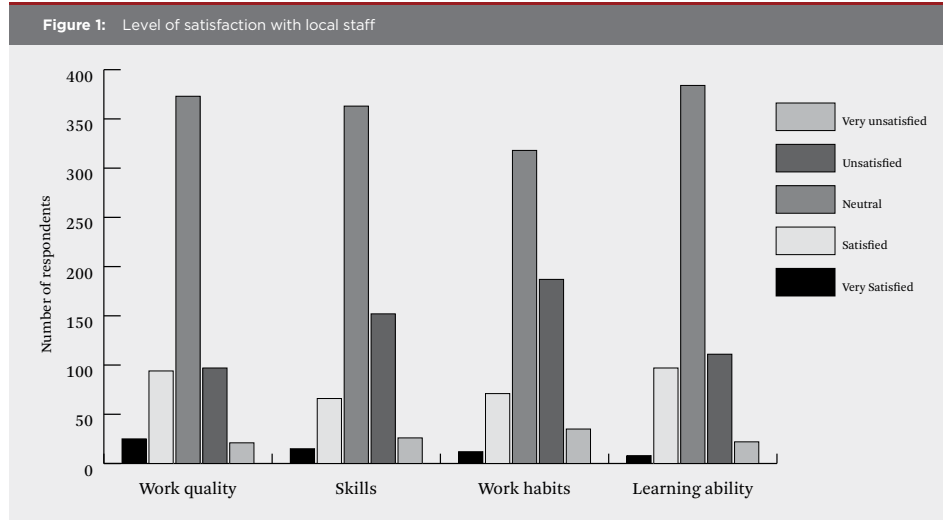
FROM 2014 TO 2016, A TOTAL OF 624 Chinese respondents were surveyed in five Zambian localities: Lusaka, Kitwe, Luanshya, Livingstone, and Kasama. The survey contained 52 questions and asked about their demographics and perceptions of local people, lifestyle, and their levels of adaptation. Our results closely parallel those of a 2016 demographic survey of 1,000 Chinese in Zambia by local NGO, Policy Monitoring and Research Centre (PMRC).⁵ Results of our study (the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST) survey) and the PMRC survey are compared in Table 1.

INDUSTRY, SATISFACTION AND ISSUES

OF THOSE SURVEYED, MOST WERE EMPLOYED in the construction industry (27%), followed by trade (16%), mining (11%), and manufacturing (10%). Figure 1 shows respondents' self-reported levels of satisfaction with local staff along four distinct attributes: work quality, skills, work habits, and learning ability. Most respondents reported "neutral" feelings for all four attributes. As shown in Figure 2, subjects averred that the biggest issues Chinese companies face "going out" [China's strategy for encouraging overseas investment] are local laws and policies (68%), communication (64%), staff management (59%), and values (58%).

FOOD, SOCIALIZATION AND ADAPTATION

ABOUT 97% OF SUBJECTS responded that they eat Chinese cuisine at home, although most of them report eating local food and western food. Thirty-two percent report having more than 10 local friends, and the majority of respondents indicated neutral feelings when asked about adaptation and integration into local society (see Figure 3). However, most respondents also reported that they attended socializing events with local people “never” (35%) or “not often” (51%).



POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

THESE RESULTS CAUTION against making broad generalizations of the level and ability of Chinese adaptation. Many Chinese do seem to adapt in commonly recognized ways, such as using host country languages, having local friends, occasionally eating local food, and viewing themselves as more or less adapted.

Adaptation should be viewed within local contexts, such as the length of time a migrant has lived in a host country. The PMRC survey found that 77 percent of Chinese had been in Zambia for five years or less and 92 percent had been there 10 years or less. Another contextual factor that influences adaptation is the types of economic activities in which Chinese migrants are involved. Most Chinese in the PMRC sample were involved in mining or construction, occupations for which collective and isolated living arrangements militate against easy adaptation.

Specifically, these results suggest a number of prudent actions for African states, China, and third parties that have inserted themselves in the China/Africa relationship, most notably the US government and media:

1. African elites should recognize that Chinese migrants differ from other, especially Western, “investors,” and that these differences affect adaptation. Chinese culture

has less in common with African cultures than do the cultures of Westerners, who are mainly Christians and native English or kindred language speakers. To live in Africa, Chinese should not be required or encouraged to imitate Westerners.

2. Chinese entities should do more to prepare Chinese immigrants for successful localization. Provinces and municipalities that economically interact with African countries can initiate programs for Chinese going to Africa to educate them on how to set up businesses and adapt to local practices and culture.
3. Third parties, especially US politicians and media, should recognize that the myths spun about how Chinese interact with Africans are becoming obsolete. Notions of “Chinese neocolonialism” and “Chinese self-isolation,” mendaciously promoted by many, including President Donald Trump’s China advisor, lack credibility among scholars and Africans alike. As more young broadly-skilled Chinese come to the continent and as Chinese adaptation deepens, third party actors will have to choose whether to maintain a propagandistic discourse about “China in Africa” or acknowledge that it has been a politically-driven exercise in misdirection. ★

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THE SAIS CHINA-AFRICA RESEARCH INITIATIVE at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) in Washington, D.C. was launched in 2014. Our mission is to promote research, conduct evidence-based analysis, foster collaboration, and train future leaders to better understand the economic and political dimensions of China-Africa relations and their implications for human security and global development.

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ENDNOTES

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