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Afrophobia impedes China's race for  
Africa's resources and markets**

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# African migrants plight in China: Afrophobia impedes China's race for Africa's resources and markets

Dirk Kohnert <sup>1</sup>

Example of an Afrophobic Chinese cartoon



Source: [reddit, r/modern propaganda](https://www.reddit.com/r/modern_propaganda), 2020 <sup>2</sup>

**Abstract:** The social fabric of the migrant's host country largely embodies major traits of the exclusion of 'strangers'. The latter often focus on ethnicity, race, religion, sexual orientation and gender. This applies also to the Afrophobia which spreads in contemporary China. Thus, current news focused on the eviction of African migrants from apartments and hotels in China. Actually, an estimated 500.000 Africans live in China. The Corona pandemic aggravated their situation. The scarcity of Chinese immigration assistance posed a challenge for Africans looking to secure residence permits, renew visas, or amend their status in other ways. They had to rely on informal or illicit networks to remain in the country. The African Union, various African governments and even the United States put pressure on Beijing over the ill-treatment of migrants, predominantly from Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya and Uganda. Shortly before, five Nigerians had been reportedly tested positive for Covid-19 in Guangzhou, the metropolis where most Africans live and work, nicknamed 'Little Africa'. These reports seem to be what has sparked the current wave of suspicion and anti-foreigner sentiment. Many African students and other migrants had left China already at the start of the outbreak. The remaining got stranded and chased around. Yet, even Chinese state media admitted that non-African foreigners like Americans and Filipinos, who accounted for more than half of foreigners living in Guangzhou who had the virus, were not singled out as scapegoats. However, racist attacks on Africans in China had a depressing long tradition, related to the expansion of bilateral petty trade of Chinese in Sub-Saharan Africa since the early 2000s and the subsequent influx of African traders in China. Already in 2008 African migrants had blocked a major street in Guangzhou protesting against the death of a Nigerian in an immigration raid.

**Keywords:** China, Africa, international migration, xenophobia, Afrophobia, racism, political violence, Afro-China relations, informal sector, illegal immigration, forced migration, slave-trade, minorities, remittances

**JEL-code:** F16, F22, F24, F51, F54, I24, I31, J46, J61, N15, N35, O15, O17, O53, Z13

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<sup>2</sup> Posted by [u/friendly](https://www.reddit.com/user/friendly), 2020, denouncing an Afrophobic and racist Anti-foreigner Chinese Cartoon titled: "Staying in China for a long time; praising China in front of people while talking shit about China on the internet behind everyone's back." ... OEPEQY refers to an "additional context: the word for "to smear (someone)", translated here as "to talk shit", is 黑, which also means "black". This may be a form of racial wordplay." (Source: OEPEQY, [reddit, r/modern propaganda](https://www.reddit.com/r/modern_propaganda), 2020). The cartoon refers to the barbarous policy of Chinese property owners and municipalities to evict African tenants from their apartments after enduring months of lockdown (Asiedu, 2020).

# 1. Introduction

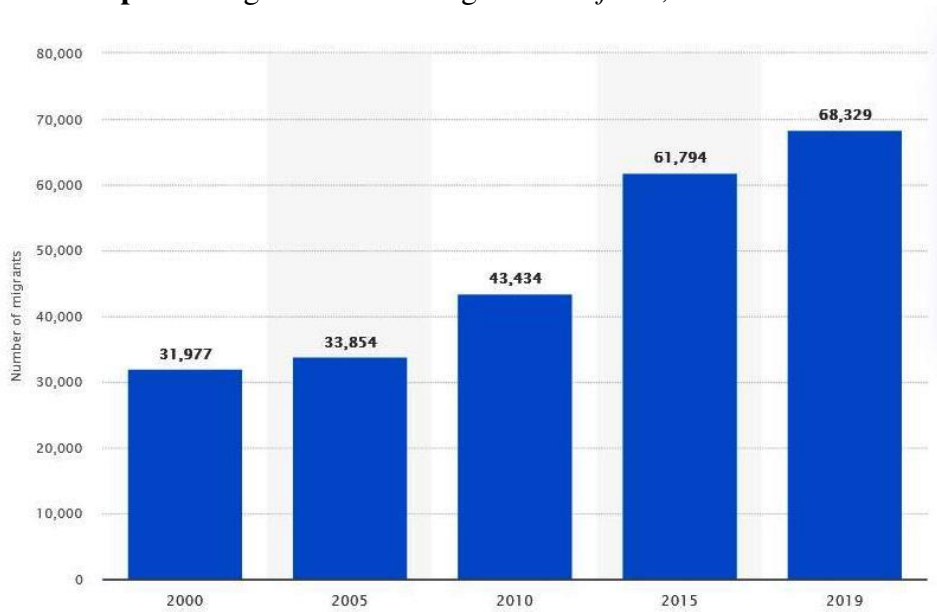
China's harsh '[Zero COVID](#)' strategy has been praised internationally as a model for the management of the [Corona pandemic](#) despite closed borders, recurrent lockdowns and interruptions of economic and social activities (Altakarli, 2020). Nevertheless, ordinary Chinese citizens apparently did not mind the continued strict anti-virus measures as long as they felt safe (McDonnell, 2021). However, the estimated 500,000 [Africans in China](#) who allegedly were singled out by local authorities and residents during the COVID-19 pandemic suffered heavily from the increasingly racist xenophobic attacks by the population as will be shown in the following. Most of them lived and worked in [Guangzhou](#), the metropole on the [Pearl River](#) in [southern China](#), formerly named Canton, about 130 km north-northwest of [Hong Kong](#). Hence the town was also nicknamed 'Little Africa' or 'Chocolate City' where about 150,000 long-term residents, according to government statistics of 2015 or – including the numerous irregular (illegal) migrants – more likely up to 300,000 Africans lived (Kuo, 2016).

Shortly after the xenophobic attacks on African migrants in Guangzhou, the local authorities issued an open letter threatening zero tolerance on racism and sexism after cases of discrimination of African nationals ([COVID-19 pandemic in mainland China](#), Wikipedia). Here, and in the following, the theoretical concept of 'race' and 'racism' is understood, following Robert Castillo, as inextricably entangled with the European-American history and the construction of 'race' as an integral element of the colonial and post-colonial global understanding of ethnic groups, identities and nationalism (Castillo, 2020; [Race \(human categorization\)](#), Wikipedia).

Most Africans came to the country in the course of the flourishing Chinese trade in [Sub-Saharan Africa](#) (SSA) in the early 2000s and the concomitant influx of African petty traders in China (Marfaing & Thiel, 2015; Zhou, et al., 2016; 2016a; Giese & Marfaing, 2019). For want of reliable data on the actual number of African migrants in China, the growing Chinese presence in Africa might be taken as a rough indicator or 'dummy' variable of the increase in African migration to China as well, next to the evolution of China-African investment and trade. The latter continued to flourish up to the pandemic, reaching US\$ 192 bn in 2019, with an estimated one to two million Chinese living in Africa (Cissé, 2021).

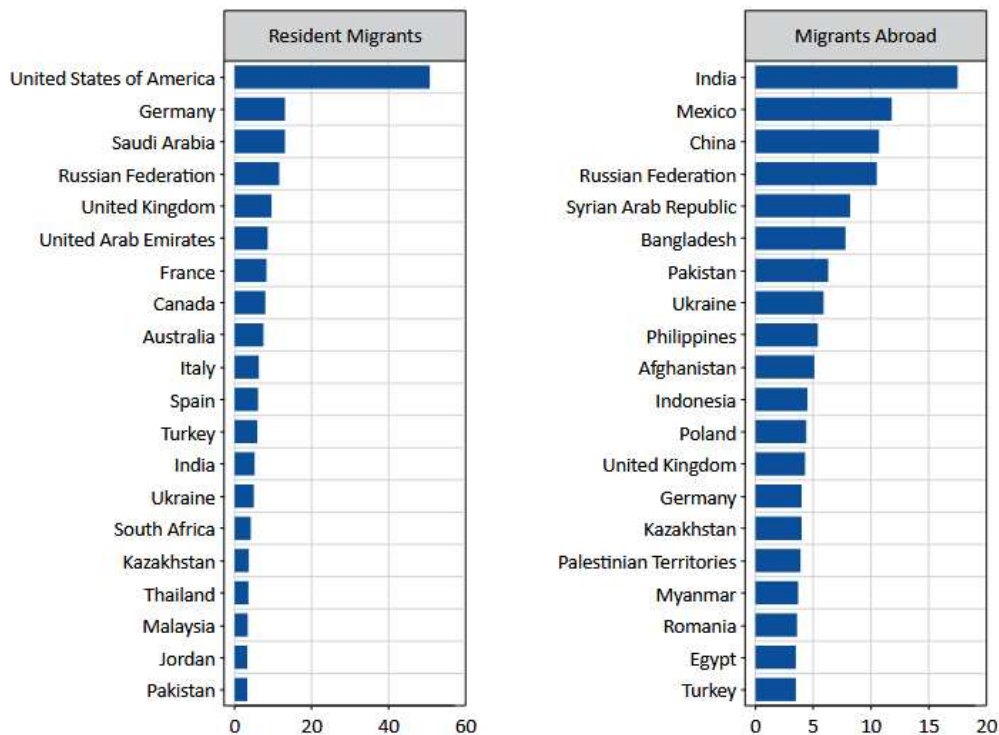
Nevertheless, there existed long-standing anti-African feelings among the Chinese population, even among the Chinese migrants in Africa, amounting to racism and a veritable [Afrophobia](#) during the pandemic. In social media video clips got viral showing Africans, mostly from [Nigeria](#), [Ghana](#), [Kenya](#) and [Uganda](#), beaten up, evicted from their flats, refused entry in hotels and even McDonald takeaway shops. African governments, the [African Union](#) (AU) and the [United States](#) protested vehemently and tried to put pressure on [Beijing](#) to stop these outrages, but mainly in vain (Asiedu, 2020).

**Graph 1: Surge of Chinese migrants in Africa, 2000 – 2019**<sup>3</sup>



Source: Sasu, 2021; © Statista 2021

**Graph 2: Chinese count among the 3 top countries of origin of migrants abroad (in millions, 2019)**



Source: UN DESA, 2019a (accessed 18 September 2019).

Source: UN-IOM, [World migration report, 2020, p. 26](#).

<sup>3</sup> These official figures are probably grossly underestimated because of the irregular (illegal) title (lack of residence permit) of many Chinese migrants in Africa with precarious status. Therefore, these figures might reflect rather the direction of growth.

In the following, a short description of the history of Chinese-African relations will lead to the analysis of the underlying fabric of the growing Afrophobia in China and its consequences for the standing of Beijing in the global competition for African's resources and markets. Thereby we have always to bear in mind that local opposition to migration and migrants is common, including many EU countries and the USA.

**Cartoon 2: 'China loves Africa'**<sup>4</sup>



Source: Victor Ndula

Central issues of analysis will be the question of whether the Chinese society, in general, has racist tendencies vis-à-vis foreigners and/or minorities and whether the actions and reactions of the countries administration on all levels, but notably in urban centres, had been part and parcel of the problem.

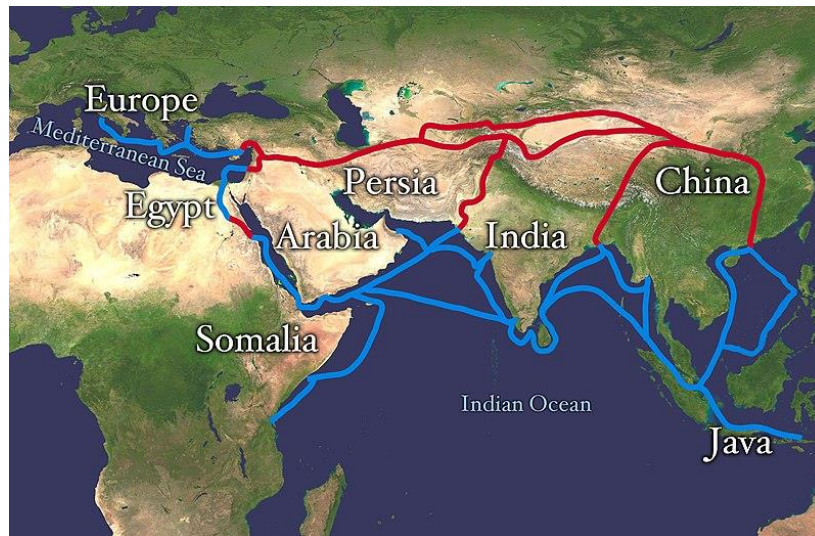
## 2. Succinct history of Sino-African relations and trade

First records of Sino-African relations and trade date back to the early days of the Chinese [silk road](#) in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, journeys of [Moroccan](#) and [Somali](#) explorers in the 14th-century and subsequent encounters of Africans and Chinese during the 15th-century voyages of the Chinese admiral [Zheng He](#) and his fleet under the reign of the [Ming dynasty](#). The fleet reached the African coast of [Somalia](#) and followed it down to the [Mozambique Channel](#). Proofs of early Chinese-African trade are beads and Chinese porcelain that has been discovered at [Great Zimbabwe](#) ([Africa-China relations](#), Wikipedia; Lan, 2017).

Modern post-war China forged strong foreign relations with African governments during the times of the [Cold War](#) within the framework of the anti-colonial struggle and the development of the [Non-Aligned Movement](#) since the [Bandung Conference](#) in 1955. Next to the common anti-colonial struggle, the participating governments aimed to promote Afro-Asian political, economic and cultural cooperation (Servant, 2005; Zeleza, 2008; [Africa-China relations](#), Wikipedia).

<sup>4</sup> Chinese President [Xi Jinping](#), threatening African statesmen, among them the Nigerian President [Muhammadu Buhari](#), Ugandan President [Yoweri Museveni](#) and the Kenyan head of state [Uhuru Kenyatta](#). Source: Cartoon posted by Victor Ndula, Twitter, @ndula\_victor, 12 April 2020, Cartoon for @dailynation, #china #Africa #covid19 #xenophobia ... 'the irony of it all'. Accessed, 20 December 2021.

**Map 1:** trading routes around the 1st century Chinese ‘Silk Road’



Source: [Africa-China relations](#), Wikipedia

Massive resentment against Africans first became publicly visible in the 1960s, when many African students from China-friendly African countries came to China to study in Beijing and since the 1970s also outside the capital (Pomfret, 1989; Lufrano, 1992).

**Picture 1:** Chinese protest against African students in Beijing, 1986 <sup>5</sup>



Source: Eric Fish @ericfish85, Twitter, 28 December 2018

The resentments were justified by fellow Chinese students because of the privileged position of many African students who received larger educational grants than resident Chinese students. Also, hostility from Chinese students towards Africans flared up because of aggressions against Africans who competed with local people for friendly relationships with Chinese women. Even the [Tiananmen Square protests of 1989](#), contained references to anti-African sentiments, visible in banners proclaiming "Stop taking advantage of Chinese women", even though the vast majority of African students had left the country already by that point ([Nanjing Anti-African protests](#), Wikipedia).

<sup>5</sup> Eric Fish, @ericfish85. --- 'The anti-African protests got students out on streets protesting authorities in a way that paved the way for Tiananmen protests 4 months later. In fact, some anti-African protest organizers in Beijing allegedly also organized during the Tiananmen movement'. <http://cowriesrice.blogspot.com/2012/12/on>

**Cartoon 3: ‘Wellcome in Chafrica’**  
African view on the omnipresence of Chinese in Africa <sup>6</sup>



Source: Camille Bour, 24 December 2021

The rush of Chinese petty traders to Africa followed the big push of Chinese Africa trade and investment since about 2005 (Rotberg, 2017). However, the foundations had been laid long before in the late 1980s when the increased flow of people between China and Africa had promoted bilateral relations, significantly based on African agency (Mohan & Lampert, 2013; Kohnert, 2016; 2010). This trend had become manifested by the establishment of the Forum of China-African Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000. The boom of bilateral trade and investment relations created promising opportunities for jobs and other income-earning possibilities, both for Chinese and Africans (Haifang, 2021).

In the beginning, however, China was rarely the preferred destination of African migrants. It rather offered a second-best alternative, usually obtained with the help of migration brokers. The latter were required because migrants' endeavours to enter the EU or the USA were inhibited by restrictive immigration regimes (Haugen, 2012). The opening of China's economy in the early 2000s created new spaces for African migrant entrepreneurs capturing a share of international value chains, transforming social and business relations, and thereby were reconfiguring urban space (Lyons & Brown & Li, 2008; Kohnert, 2010).

In the eyes of most African migrants, success, or social mobility were not evaluated by their difficult life in China, but by the perspectives of future improved living standards at home in Africa (Yin, 2017). Notably, South China became the new Promised Land for African migrants (Lan, 2017; Marfaing & Thiel, 2015; Giese & Marfaing, 2019). Their satisfaction with their improved economic situation in China, family support, but also prior victimization experience in their mother country, strongly predict their sense of perceived security in their

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<sup>6</sup> In this drawing, the renowned Nigerian cartoonist Tayo Fatunla “wanted to illustrate the omnipresence of Beijing on the continent. “Welcome to Chafrica” For some observers, China's influence is a real advantage for Africa. According to Nigerian cartoonist Tayo Fatunla, "It's a healthy relationship that can work because Nigerians have accepted help from China, where others have failed." “There are also a lot of Africans in China so understanding of each other is mutual. Welcome to CHAFRICA ”, explains Tayo Fatunla.” (Camille Bour, Paris: [tv5monde.com](https://www.tv5monde.com) 24, December 2021)

host country. Their trust in fellow Chinese entrepreneurs was attributed to their security assessment too (Song, et al, 2020; Kohnert, 2010).

However, there existed remarkable variations in the evaluation of Chinese-African relations according to the home country of African migrants. According to a 2008 review, [Kenyans](#), [Sudanese](#) and [Ethiopians](#) were most positive about China–Africa links, [Botswanians](#) and [Zambians](#) most negative, and [Nigerians](#), [Ghanaians](#), [Egyptians](#) and [South Africans](#) in between. Yet, apart from South Africans, the majority viewed China’s development as a progressive model (Sautmann & Hairong, 2009).

Moreover, there existed a notable disparity between the social and economic dimensions of the migrant’s networks, described as 'bounded solidarity' on the one hand, and 'enforceable trust' on the other (Müller & Wehrhahn, 2011). The social networks apparently were not instrumental concerning its assumed economic benefit. Rather economic cooperation between intermediaries led to drawbacks for the individual entrepreneur. This was a major reason for the strategy of highly autonomous economic action of individual migrants. Nevertheless, social networking was essential for survival in an adverse and racist local surrounding (Müller & Wehrhahn, 2011).

The relations of Chinese and African petty traders changed fundamentally since the xenophobe manifestations against ‘the Chinese’ in several African towns in the early 2000s. This applied also to their mutual incomprehension in Chinese towns (mostly in the urban subdistricts of Guangzhou, [Xiaobei](#) and [Sanyuanli](#)) where migrant African entrepreneurs arrived shortly afterwards.

Many, if not most of them, did not come to stay in the host country permanently, but they acted rather as a sojourner, exploring the terrain in search of profitable trade, i.e. Chinese exports of cheap consumer goods to Africa. Their mutual economic interest was based on the development of Chinese industrial production that facilitated Africans access to the desired Western products at an affordable price (Marfaing & Thiel, 2015; Giese & Marfaing, 2019; Kohnert, 2016). Thus, entrepreneurial migrants, who incorporated globalization from below in their transnational economic practices, became themselves carriers of social and economic transformations in their respective host countries. The realm of these transformations covered a remarkable range, from specific access strategies to resources and social mobility, changing consumer behaviour, new norms and practices up to modifications of taste and ways of life (Giese & Marfaing, 2019; Kohnert, 2016).

### 3. Problems of modern African migrants in China

#### 3.1 Major traits and trajectories of scholarly discussion

Scholarly discussion of modern African migration to China often took the general Western view and concept of cross-border migration for granted. It implicitly or explicitly postulated the attractiveness of the blessings of political, economic, social and cultural development in the highly industrialized countries. Particularly, it emphasized individualistic conceptions of human rights and embraced the belief that the West provided more opportunities for migrants to integrate (Nawyn, 2016). Moreover, the Western Afro-pessimistic perspective favoured and reinforced prejudiced imaginaries of typical characteristics of ‘the African’ (e.g. as being lazy, tardy, unreliable, etc.) alleged without historic and time consciousness, as shown by the



controversy on French President N. Sarkozy's speech in Dakar (Senegal) in 2007 (McGreal, 2007). No wonder, that up to date the insistence on Western trusteeship and a missionary zeal have been prevalent in the Western world and even among Africans, opposed to the assumed Chinese ruthlessness vis-à-vis foreigners (Liang & Billon, 2020). Yet, these conceptions also reflect the particular social hierarchies in Western host countries of migrants, including notions of legal and illegal migration. However, all these prejudices entail also an impaired vision of the economic opportunities available in the [Global South](#), with an accompanying [fetishization](#) of [Global North](#) economies (Nawyn, 2016).

Last, but not least, the Western concept of '[race](#)', widely shared by the Chinese society too, prevailed up to date, although 'race' as a biological category was discredited in the scholarly discussion long ago. Contemporary Chinese thinking still is based on concepts of conceiving 'otherness', concentrating on differences such as skin colour, class and '[ethnicity](#)', handed down for centuries (Castillo, 2016).

As for African students in China, who constitute a significant share of all 'foreigners' in the country, their decision-making processes leading them to study at Chinese universities were shaped by structural inequalities. Thus, students were coerced into moving overseas out of political and economic reasons, or as students from the middle class, not affluent enough by global standards, and members of the African elite who took advantage of social networks to secure a diplomatic scholarship. Thus, individual and family goals were conveyed to educational migration. But social differentiation and everyday social life experienced by African students in the host country often reinforced racial prejudices and development asymmetries vis-à-vis the Chinese (Mulvey, 2021; Ho, 2016).

As for petty traders, both Africans and Chinese mostly belonged to the lower class. They faced precarity, often due to their illegal status and reliance on dubious and informal networks, a situation that became even more pronounced amid the COVID-19 pandemic (Asiedu, 2020; Jordan et al, 2021).

However, the structuring forces of precarity, provoked by factors of global poverty and established by counter-acting national and local policies and institutions, generated also challenges and opportunities for mixed African-Chinese families of overlapping mobilities (Jordan et al, 2021). One example was the remarkable solidarity within African migrant networks in China concerning health care. Africans had only restricted access to local health services because of a combination of social and structural barriers. Thus, almost 5,000 African students in [Wuhan](#), the location of the first lockdown of the Corona pandemic in January 2020, were lacking cash and food during the Corona lockdown (Bodomo, 2020). Yet, by strategic community-led initiatives, many African communities tried to overcome the restrictions. Thus, the [Ghanaian](#) community in [Guangzhou](#) donated cash and arranged health care for their community. Other communities also compiled information about visits of healthcare providers from Africa for their members and encourage these visiting specialists to informally consult the needy voluntarily. Family elders and religious leaders played a major role as healthcare providers (Bodomo, 2020).

In future, the children of African parents of itinerant traders who are born and grow up in China might also serve as links between the two regions. These prospects have been greatly facilitated by the hospitality and logistics of informal infrastructures set up by African migrants in the late 1990s, which subsequently evolved and adapted. Thus, individual and group mobility and sojourning will play increasingly an important role in governing trade relations by cultural and economic brokerage (Haugen, 2019). This specific social

infrastructure facilitated the mobility of people and goods and increased the pace at which trading capital circulated (Haugen, 2019; Cheuk, 2021). However, the flow of migration often portrayed and oversimplified as based on bipolar push and pull factors, corresponded rather to a concept of circular, transient and conceptional migration trajectories (Marfaing & Thiel, 2015; Giese & Marfaing, 2019; Cheuk, 2019; Carling & Haugen, 2021). Therefore, the concept of '[transient state](#)' would be a more appropriate term. This applies not only to Africans living in China, but also to Chinese in Africa, both often with no desire to integrate into the host country, and frequently also with no possibility of being integrated, which rendered their life unstable and their future uncertain (Leslie, 2018).

Already the Chinese migration law of 2013 had underscored the distinction between immigrants and native-born citizens. The law, called the [Exit and Entry Administration Law](#) (EEAL), focused especially on illegal entry, residence, and employment (Cissé, 2021). The racial profiling of Africans by the Chinese police made Africans especially vulnerable targets of police officers, who were under great pressure to improve their performance statistics and often were motivated also by monetary incentives. The Public Security Bureau of Guangzhou, for example, classified Africans in the city as 'triple illegal', or sanfei 三非, an expression referring to those who enter, stay, and work in China illegally (Huang, 2019).

In response, several African migrants developed adapted coping strategies to counter the stigma of illegality, given Beijing's stringent immigration policy, by employing different levels of interactions with local society. In Guangzhou for example, African migrants outwitted the administration by collaborating with Chinese business partners from less developed regions of the country. Collaboration with these migrants enabled African traders to bypass some of the constraints imposed by state immigration law. It also expanded their motility options beyond Guangzhou to other Chinese cities like [Yiwu](#) (Lan, 2016).

Also the administration's motives behind the urban renewal project in Guangzhou's quarter of Xiaobei, as part of the municipal government's vision of building a 'clean, safe and orderly' city, were obviously affecting disproportionately marginalized populations. These included not only transnational sojourners but domestic migrants as well, in efforts to control the 'floating population' of domestic ([Han](#) and non-Han) migrants (Wilczak, 2017). Nevertheless, Africans were targeted most ([Africans in Guangzhou](#), Wikipedia). The stigmatization of African migrants following the [Ebola pandemic](#), for example, further enhanced the difficulty to access health information and services and subsequently made them more susceptible to discrimination (Lin, 2015).

Thus, migration could at the same time enrich and strain bilateral trade and foreign relations and even impact the hosts' social stability. African migrants' recourse to intermarriage as an adaptation strategy, and the engagement of a few migrants in drug trading, internet fraud and prostitution, could endanger China's relationship with Africa (Elochukwu, 2016). Beijing had to face the dilemma between the Sino-African friendship discourse at the foreign policy level and the mounting Afrophobia at the local level. It saw its African allies mainly as strategic political and not as economic partners on equal terms. Therefore, Chinese propaganda focused on China's aid to Africa, not on the latter's contribution to the Chinese economy. This also perpetuated the negative stereotypes of the Chinese of Africans as poor and needy (Yin, 2017).

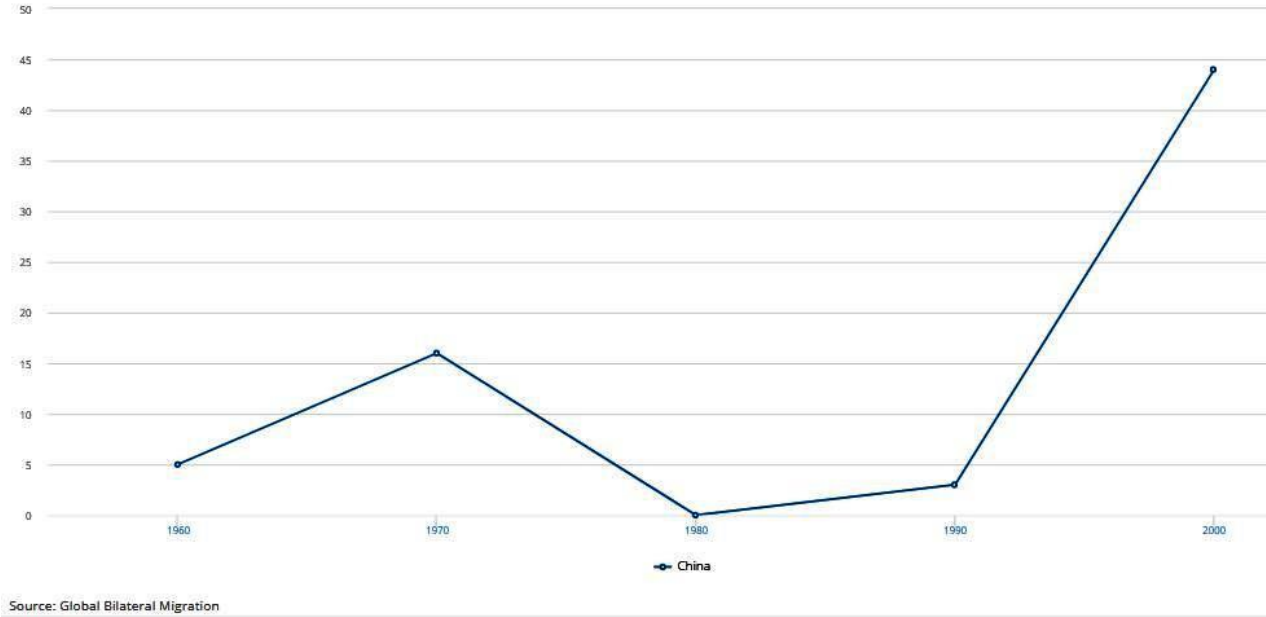
In short, the social fabric of the migrant's host country largely embodies major traits of the exclusion of 'strangers'. The latter often focus on ethnicity, race, religion, sexual orientation and gender. This applies also to the Afrophobia which spreads in contemporary China. Thus,

current news focused on the eviction of African migrants from apartments and hotels in China. Actually, an estimated 500.000 Africans live in China. The Corona pandemic aggravated their situation.

### 3.2 African migration to China since 1960 triggered by the evolution of Chinese consumer goods exports to Africa

The growing Afrophobia was presumably also driven by the rising migration of Africans to China in recent decades. According to official figures, the total of regular African migrants in China increased only modestly from 5,000 to 45,000 in the period 1960 to 2000. They might at best reflect the direction of the increase, not the factual numbers. Unfortunately, more recent official data for the past two decades are not available. According to informed estimates, however, reported in the Chinese and Western press, various assessments circulated on both regular and irregular African migrants in China, which were always much higher, ranging from 100,000 to 200,000 already in 2008 (Gazibo & Alexeeva, 2012). About a decade later, there were about 500,000 regular and irregular African migrants living in China in 2020, according to informed estimates.

**Graph 3:** regular African migrants in China, 1960 - 2000 (total of 45 African countries, in thousands, official figures)

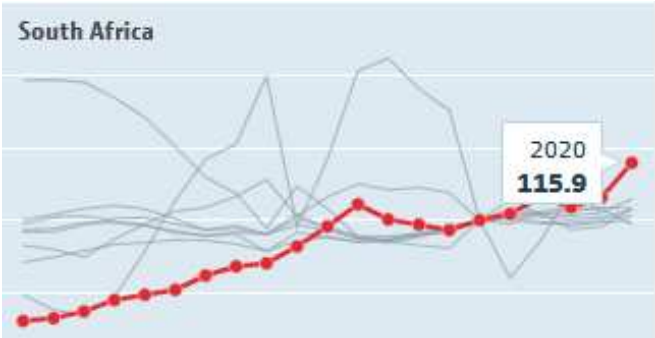


Source: WB (2021): Databank - [Global Bilateral Migration](#) (Last updated: 06/28/2011, no more recent data available)

For want of reliable data, a second-best indicator for rising immigration tendencies may be the growing Chinese-Africa trade and investment. Since the early 2000s, a growing number of African petty traders tried to get their share of the cake, parallel and accompanying mounting Chinese trade and investment in Africa, by organizing the importation of Chinese goods directly from its sources in China (Marfaing & Thiel, 2015; Giese & Marfaing, 2019; Kohnert, 2016).

The China – Africa trade started to increase substantially only in early 2000 (see Graph 6). The volume of trade increased steadily for the past 16 years. In 2019, China became Africa’s biggest bilateral trading partner with a total trade of US\$ 200 bn (Stein & Uddhammar, 2021). In 2019, Chinese exports to Africa amounted to US\$ 113 bn and imports from Africa reached US\$ 78 bn. Most of this trade was with Sub-Saharan countries that counted for two-thirds of the trade. However, its regional distribution was uneven, the six biggest export destinations of Chinese trade with Africa, among them South Africa, Nigeria and Egypt absorbed over half of total exports. The same applied to Chinese imports from Africa. Six countries made up 68 % of total imports, with Angolan oil accounting for almost one-third (Stein & Uddhammar, 2021).

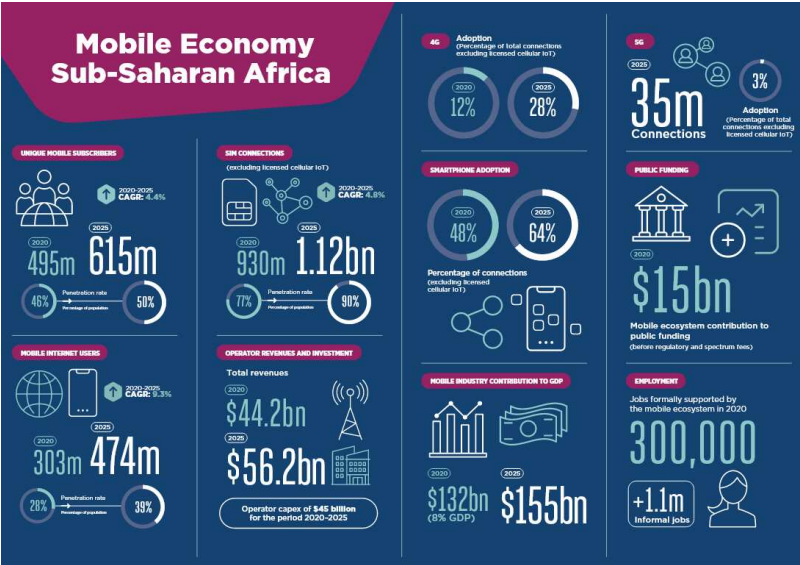
**Graph 4:** South Africa’s terms of trade, 2000 – 2020 (OECD) <sup>7</sup>



Source: OECD (2021), Terms of trade (indicator (Accessed on 31 December 2021)

The increased bilateral trade resulted in a win-win situation for all partners, at least according to most governments involved on both sides. Fact is, for African countries it was a major stimulus of the considerable economic growth from the late 1990s to 2014.

**Graph 5:** Projected development of the mobile phone economy in SSA, 2020-2025



Source: [GSMA-2021](#), London: Global System for Mobile Communications, [GSMA](#)

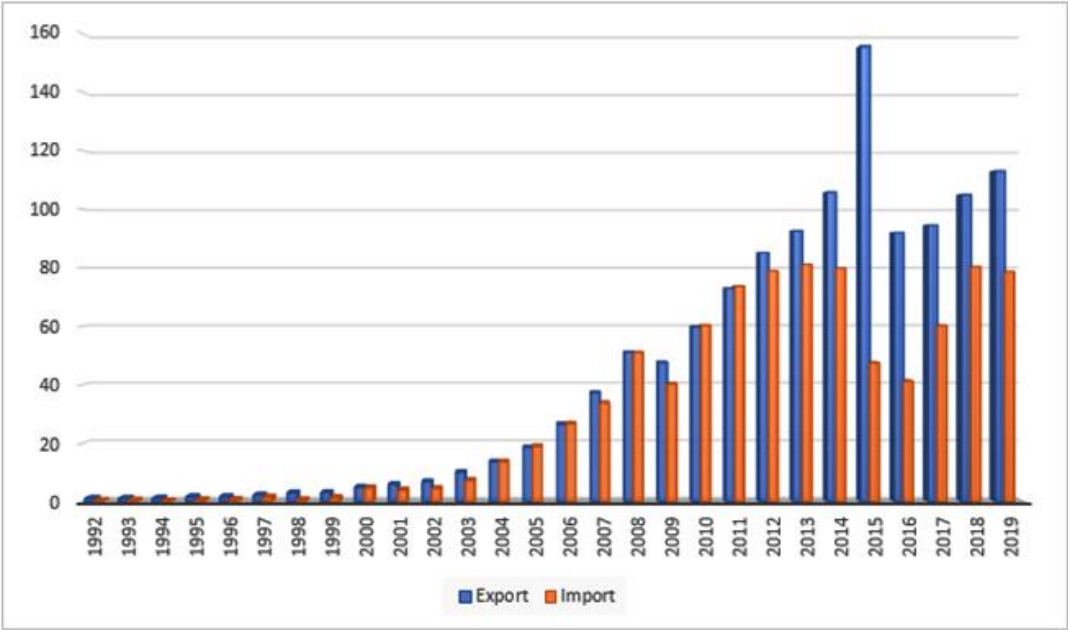
<sup>7</sup> ‘Terms of trade are defined as the ratio between the index of export prices and the index of import prices. If the export prices increase more than the import prices, a country has positive terms of trade, as for the same amount of exports, it can purchase more imports’. (OECD, 2021):

China provided Africans with cheap consumer goods, affordable also for the African poor, as well as with capital goods. Moreover, advanced consumer goods, like mobile phones, now affordable also to ordinary citizens, contributed to reducing the digital divide with developed countries, the creation of new markets and empowerment of the disadvantaged.

Also, the growing Chinese demand for African’s resources improved African terms of trade as well as its financial revenues and enabled African economies to diversify foreign trade, notably in the more advanced SSA economies like South Africa (see Graph 4).

Since the 2010s, a shift in the main investors of FDI in Africa, away from the traditional highly industrialised Western countries to the BRICS nations (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) has been observed. China and India became significant global players in Africa, competing for strategic space (Chakrabarti, & Ghosh, 2014). Whereas Beijing’s ambition was mainly linked to the pursuit of the 'One China' foreign policy, New Delhi aimed to counterbalance the dominant Chinese influence in Africa and to get support for its political agenda concerning agricultural trade, climate change, and permanent membership in the UN Security Council (Chakrabarti, & Ghosh, 2014).

**Graph 6:** Growth of China’s trade in goods and services with Africa, 1992-2019 (in US\$ billion, current prices)



Source: Stein & Uddhammar, 2021  
 UN Comtrade and the SAIS China Africa Research Initiative (SAIS-CARI)

According to the UNCTAD World Investment Report for 2020, Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) to Africa was to fall by 25 % to 40 % in 2020, the first year of the Corona pandemic. The negative trend would be worsened by low commodity prices. Already before the pandemic, in 2019, FDI flows to Africa had already declined by 10 % to US\$ 45 bn (UNCTAD, 2020).

As for Chinese Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), this was mainly allocated to consolidate and extend Africa’s infrastructure. The latter was mostly outdated since colonial times, such as railways, roads, ports, airports and sewage, but also prestigious ‘political’ projects got financed, like stadiums, parliamentary buildings and residences for the head of states. Also,

China provided Africa with modern know-how and technology and Chinese investments increased the overall productive capacity of African economies (Stein & Uddhammar, 2021).

**Graph 7:** China’s largest export markets in Africa (2019)

Country	Exports, in USD billion	% of Chinese exports to Africa
South Africa	16.6	14.6 %
Nigeria	16.6	14.6 %
Egypt	12.2	10.7 %
Algeria	6.9	6.1 %
Kenya	4.9	4.3 %
Ghana	4.9	4.3 %
<b>Total six countries</b>		<b>54.6 %</b>

Source: *China-Africa Research Initiative*<sup>6</sup>

Source: Stein & Uddhammar, 2021

**Graph 8:** China’s key import destinations in Africa (2019)

Country	Imports, in USD billion	Percent of Chinese imports from Africa
Angola	23.3	29.8 %
South Africa	9.5	12.1 %
Republic of Congo	5.9	7.5 %
DRC	4.9	6.2 %
Libya	4.7	6.0 %
Gabon	4.6	5.9 %
<b>Total six countries</b>		<b>67.5 %</b>

Source: *China-Africa Research Initiative*<sup>7</sup>

Source: Stein & Uddhammar, 2021

**Graph 9:** Main recipients of Chinese FDI (2019, in USD billion)

Country	Total stock, in USD billion	Percent of Chinese FDI in Africa
South Africa	6.1	13.8 %
DRC	5.5	12.5 %
Angola	2.9	6.5 %
Zambia	2.8	6.5 %
Ethiopia	2.5	5.6 %
Ghana	1.8	4.1 %
<b>Total six countries</b>	<b>21.6</b>	<b>49.1 %</b>

Sources: *UNCTAD and China-Africa Research Initiative*<sup>8</sup>

Source: Stein & Uddhammar, 2021

However, the Chinese conquest of African markets had also its drawbacks. Thus, it impeded the emergence of a nascent African manufacturing sector, for example in the textile industry (Sylvanus, 2013), displaced local enterprises and workers, last, but not least, because of the often unfair dumping wages for Chinese workers on construction sites in various African countries and deplorable labour conditions for African workers in Chinese enterprises (Xiaoyang, 2016), Mbamalu, 2018). Also, Chinese exports to Africa could crowd out exports from the more advanced African economies, for example, South Africa.

All this may create new dependencies of African countries with strategic implications and not a few African politicians accuse Beijing of neo-colonial behaviour (Lisimba, 2020). Therefore, it is still an open question whether China's foreign trade policy incorporates a specific Chinese model for development to be replicated in Africa (Stein & Uddhammar, 2021).

China created 25 economic and trade cooperation zones ([SEZs](#)) in 16 African countries, registered with [China's Ministry of Commerce](#). They were meant to create a platform of Beijing's strategy of engagement in Africa as 'mutually beneficial, based on market-based decisions and investment by Chinese companies, combined with support and subsidies from the Chinese government (Bräutigam & Xiaoyang 2011). At first sight, SEZs seemed to promote Beijing's '[Flying Geese](#)' or '[Leading Dragon](#)' model for sustained African industrial development. However, Africa's experience with SEZs has been disappointing. They failed to attract sufficient investment, promote export, or create sustainable industrial development. The SEZs were too focused on short-term gains, and could not mitigate poor infrastructure, conflict of interest between host governments and investors, domestic social and political conflicts and political instability nor adjust environmental issues (Okereby, 2019).

Beijing decided that her own companies would take the lead in developing these zones. However, critical reports insisted that these zones were rather intended to help China's own restructuring, allowing the labour intensive, less competitive industries, such as textiles, leather goods, and building materials to move offshore. Yet, mainly African governments themselves were to blame for the failure of the SEZs. Its political leaders lacked the determination to integrate these zones into overall industrial policy and often used it for their own political advancement. Mostly, local manufacturers were not allowed to operate in these zones, even when Chinese developers and host governments jointly shared ownership. Thus, the Lagos State government held 40 % shares of the [Lekki Free Trade Zone](#) in Nigeria, but local manufacturers could not use it, because the SEZs were sealed off like a military base (Okereby, 2019).

Nevertheless, China continued to invest heavily across the continent throughout the COVID-19 pandemic (IISD, 2021). Currently, it is the fourth-biggest investor in Africa. In recent times Beijing invested within its ambitious '[Belt and Road Initiative](#)' progressively in the African services sector, including subsectors, such as scientific research and technology services, transport, warehousing, and postal services. However, an increasing number of African states had to suspend or abandon the projects in recent times because they were unable to repay their loans (IISD, 2021).

### *3.3 Break-down of the flow of remittances during the Corona pandemic*

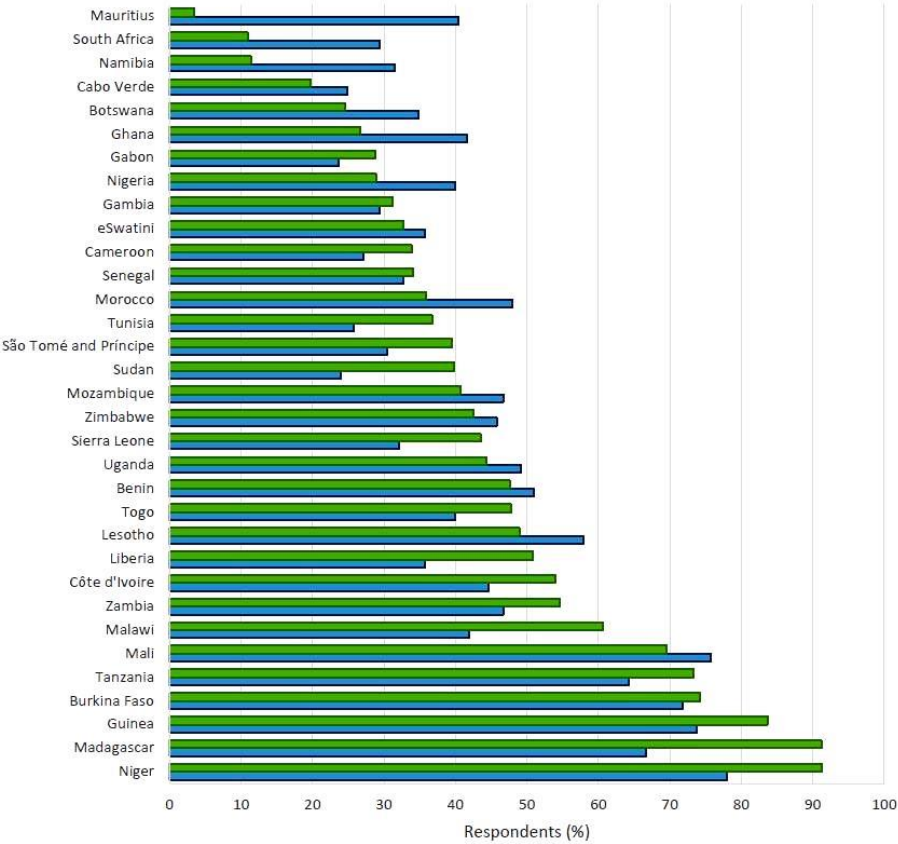
The [Covid pandemic](#) since January 2020 further increased the risk and precarity of African migrants' daily life, notably that of petty traders with irregular status. The lockdown increased their risk of interception by state authorities each time they left their home and visited market sites for their business. They often depended on services offered by trusted agents, habitually fellow migrants themselves, through whom they transferred and received their trades goods and funds (Gill, 2020). This impacted also their families back home.

The World Bank forecasted an unprecedented fall in [remittances](#) for 2020 and 2021 on a global scale. Global remittance could fall by 19.9 % and flows to Africa even by 23.1 % in 2020. This would have removed a major source of income for many African families back

home and affected their capacity to respond to and recover from the crisis (Kalantaryan, & McMahon, 2020). In 2021 the World Bank adjusted its figures to a decline of remittances flow by 12.5 % for SSA in 2020 which had been almost entirely due to a 28 % decline in remittance flows to Nigeria. Excluding Nigeria, remittance flows to SSA even increased by 2.3 % on average. Remittance growth mounted especially for Zambia (37 %), Mozambique (16 %), Kenya (9 %) and Ghana (5 %). In 2021, remittance flows to the region had been projected by the WB to rise by 2.6 % on average, supported by improving prospects for growth in high-income countries (Kalantaryan & McMahon, 2020). Unfortunately, a breakdown of general data on remittances of African migrants in China is not yet available. First case studies (see below), however, suggest that it might be considerable.

Closures of banks and offices of [Western Union](#), the latter used especially by poorer Africans who had no bank account for money transfers, as well as the termination of other transfer operators in Africa and China, further aggravated the problem. In the last resort, a shift to digital remittance transfers would have been possible, but only for those who disposed of more sophisticated smartphones and internet access. Yet, according to a recent study of [Afrobarometer](#) in eight countries ([Benin](#), [Lesotho](#), [Tanzania](#), [Madagascar](#), [Burkina Faso](#), [Guinea](#), [Mali](#), [Niger](#)) more than half of the people who depended on remittances had no access to the internet through a mobile phone (Kalantaryan, & McMahon, 2020).

**Graph 10:** No internet access, no bank account, among those Africans depending on remittances



Source: Kalantaryan, S & McMahon, S (2020)



#### 4. Implications of Afrophobia on China's standing in the global competition for African resources and markets

African migration to China has been triggered by the evolution of Chinese exports to and investments in Africa and the accompanying influx of Chinese labourers and petty traders. Chinese construction companies often insisted on bringing their fellow Chinese workers to carry out most of the project operations (Dalibi & Bello, 2017). Moreover, a growing number of African students tried to get their diplomas at Chinese universities. The increasing Afrophobia was driven by the rising migration of Africans to China in recent decades, next to the general prevalence of latent racist attitudes among the Chinese population as described above. African governments, the [African Union](#) (AU) and the [United States](#) protested vehemently and tried to put pressure on [Beijing](#) to stop these outrages, but mainly in vain (Asiedu, 2020).

The negative Chinese reputation because of growing Afrophobia might c. p. trigger a shift away of the African trade and investment demand to competitive global suppliers like India, the EU and the USA. It thus might impact significantly on the standing of Beijing in the global competition for African's resources and markets. Nevertheless, one should always bear in mind that local opposition to migration and migrants is common, including many EU countries and the USA.

Since the 2000s there were increasing concerns about the sellout and 'land-grabbing' in Africa. The Western media as well as scholarly studies attributed it primarily to the greed of China and the Gulf states. Also, competing global players, including the US, EU and India took the opportunity to blame Chinese's 'new imperialism' for other wrongdoings. In the first place figured the ruthless 'scramble' for Africa's resources, whereby Chinese financial and state actors allegedly bloated communal and privatized lands under their control within the context of global commodity price volatility or transnational economic super-cycles, and struggles between monopolies and states over African resources (Ajl, 2010). All this reinforced the prevailing mainstream sinophobia.

Yet, then again one had to admit that Beijing's Africa investments with its long-run orientation towards stable commodity flows and the building up of a continent-wide infrastructure, compared positively, e.g. with the US orientation at short-term accumulation and profits. This dynamic may also have contributed to stabilising commodity demand and thereby African development policies that still rely heavily on the stability of raw material demand and prices (Ajl, 2010).

However, high-flying leftist visions of a regime-change, enabled by the non-aligned movement, notably the [BRICS](#) countries mentioned above, could obscure the 'new-imperialism' under the disguise of China's characterization as the most important anti-capitalist actor worldwide. Apparently, the switch from the colonial pattern of export-oriented cash crop production, envisaged by the [Bandung Conference](#) in 1955, towards a more equitable society by the nationalisation of land, and attempts to create a sustainable surplus-value in the course of post-national liberation, did not realize. As a matter of fact, also the new Asian players, China and India, contributed to the accelerating rural pauperization and the lasting social agrarian differentiation (Ajl, 2010; Mupambwa & Xaba 2021).

A current political movement particularly advocated in the former colonial powers and shaped by right-wing, conservative nationalism, embracing racism, offers once again a justification of

the colonial endeavour. However, the prejudice that colonialism, despite its multiple fallacies, had inspired development in African societies that subsequently followed the trait of 'modernisation', including democracy, enlightened governance and efficient administration, which in turn inspired national consciousness and national liberation struggles, underwent harsh scholarly critique (Parashar & Schulz, 2021). In this respect, it is quite understandable that many Africans regarded Beijing's engagement in Africa as relief from the century-old 'civilizing mission' of the former colonial powers. Therefore, Chinese aid, its soft, non-conditional loans, and its commitment to non-interference in African domestic affairs were most welcomed. Moreover, China's engagement also corresponded with growing African discontent with the Western approach, including its historical legacies, its post-colonial military presence in Africa and its cultural imperialism through the imposition of western values and norms (Galchu, 2018).

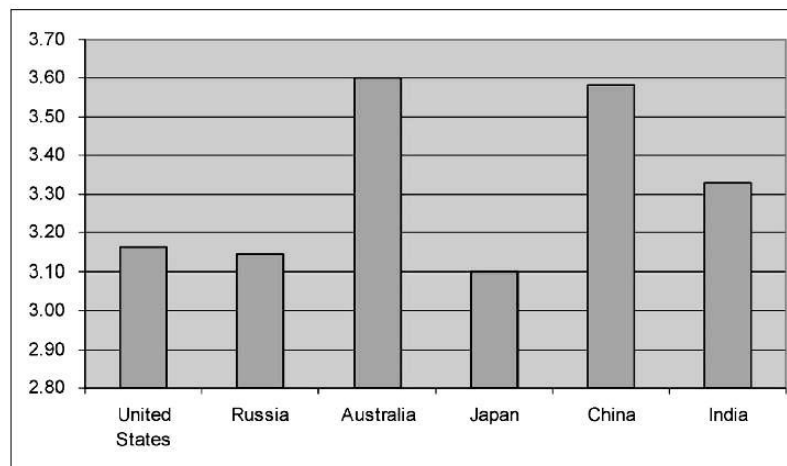
Lately, however, Chinese-African relations have cooled down. Beijing's growing influence, coupled with its perceived selfish and intractable mercantilist activities, led to growing resentment. Moreover, the Chinese neglect of universal human rights principles, including the observation of global best practices in labour and environmental management in African countries made that Chinese relations with Africa have been on ascendancy (Okon & Ojatorotu, 2021). This has been intensified by the discriminatory policies towards Africans in China that triggered diplomatic tensions (Sibiri, 2021). In Africa and elsewhere, China's 'Belt and Road Initiative' has been increasingly perceived not just as a gigantic infrastructure and telecommunications project, but also as an expression of 21st-century Chinese global hegemony. Yet, any credible positioning of the USA against China's racism would require that the American society itself would combat effectively racism in its own ranks (Dever & Dever, 2021).

Thus, migration could at the same time enrich and strain bilateral trade and foreign relations and even impact the hosts' social stability. Beijing had to face the dilemma between the Sino-African friendship discourse at the foreign policy level and the mounting Afrophobia at the local level. It propagated partnership on equal terms with Africa was apparently built on sand. The Chinese government saw in thinly veiled tactical manoeuvres its African allies mainly as strategic political counterparts and not as economic partners on equal terms. Instead, Chinese propaganda focused on China's aid to Africa, not on the latter's contribution to the Chinese economy, not to mention the global race for African resources and markets. This also perpetuated the Chinese negative stereotypes of Africans as poor and needy. In short, the social fabric of the migrant's host country largely embodies major traits of the exclusion of 'strangers'. The Corona pandemic aggravated their situation.

## 5. Conclusion

According to western media, the People's Republic of China represented mainly negative clichés in the global race for Africa's resources and markets. It stood for oppression, centralization and a central government economy. Its major Asian competitor India, on the contrary, was praised as a beacon of democracy in Asia compared to China (s. Kohnert, 2021). Notably, during the [Cold War](#) that propagated a '*clash of systems*' or even a '*clash of civilizations*' (S.P. Huntington), India was supported as the 'largest democracy in the world'. It stood for individual freedom, decentralization and competition.

**Graph 11:** Citizen's satisfaction with government performance in six countries

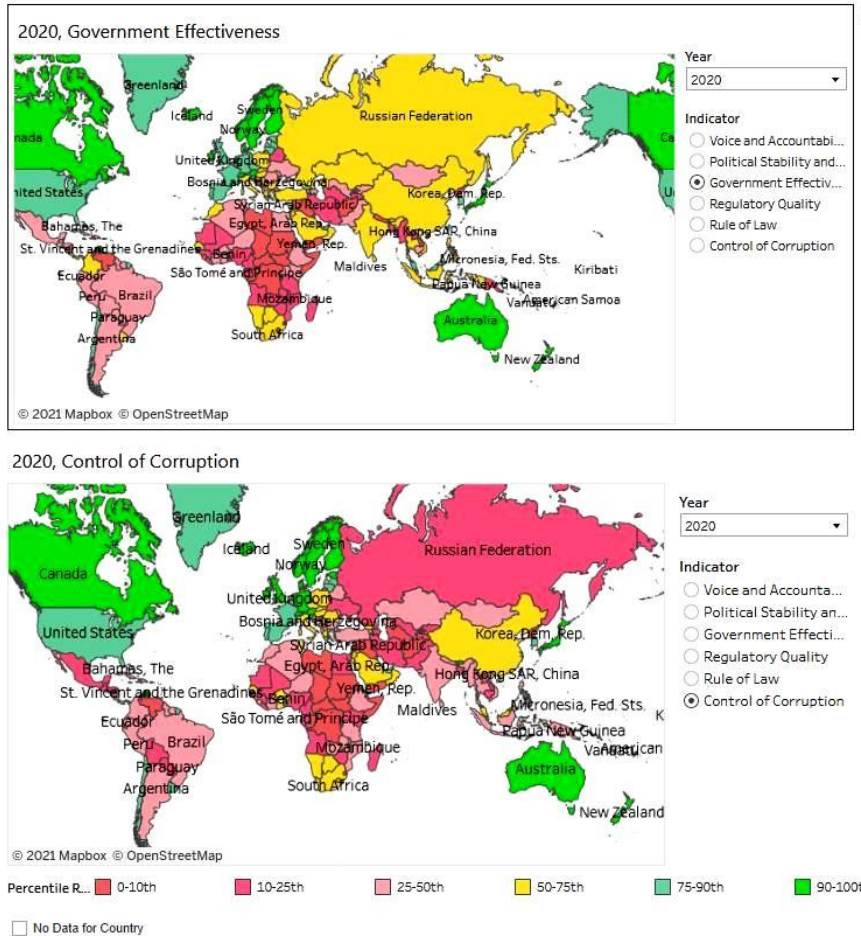


Wang, 2010: 62

However, the Western model of [multiparty democracy](#) may not be as impartial as it is sold to international public opinion. For example, one could legitimately wonder whether disregard for basic [human rights](#) in India's caste system counts less than democracy. If the population concerned would be asked to give their opinion, the picture would probably be different (see Graph 11). One could ask for example, whether the rigid [Indian caste system](#), gross inequality, poverty and racism in India are less important violations of basic human rights.

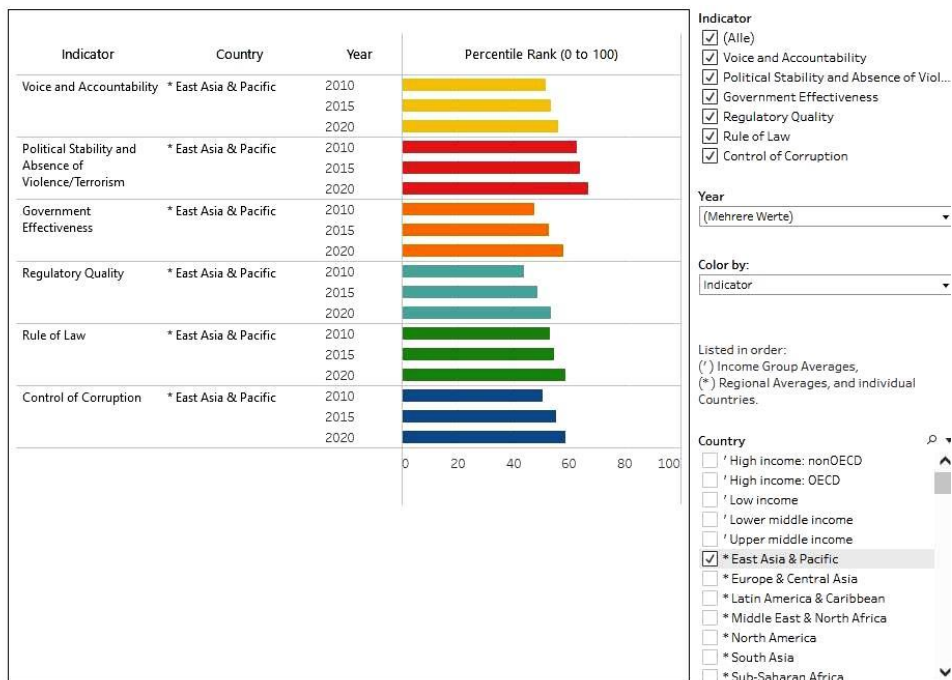
Certainly there exist considerable variations in the evaluation of government performance within large countries like India and China, where citizens of different regions undoubtedly would give different assessments of good governance. Besides, there is supposed to be a satisfaction gap between the rich and the poor, as well as between coastal and hinterland populations. Recent findings of the [Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation](#) at [Harvard University](#), based on a long-term public opinion survey in China, unveiled that Chinese citizen's had a very high satisfaction of 95.5 % of respondents with the central government in 2016. U.S. citizen satisfaction with the American federal government, on the contrary, was just 38 % (Harsha, 2020). Other scholarly studies suggested moreover strong divergences between people's own evaluations, compared with the evaluation of governance quality such as the World Bank [Government effectiveness index](#) (Wang, 2010). Thus, the citizen's evaluation of government performance in China was rated significantly higher than that in India.

**Graph 12: Worldwide governance indicators, 2020** (World Bank, 2021)



Source: World Bank

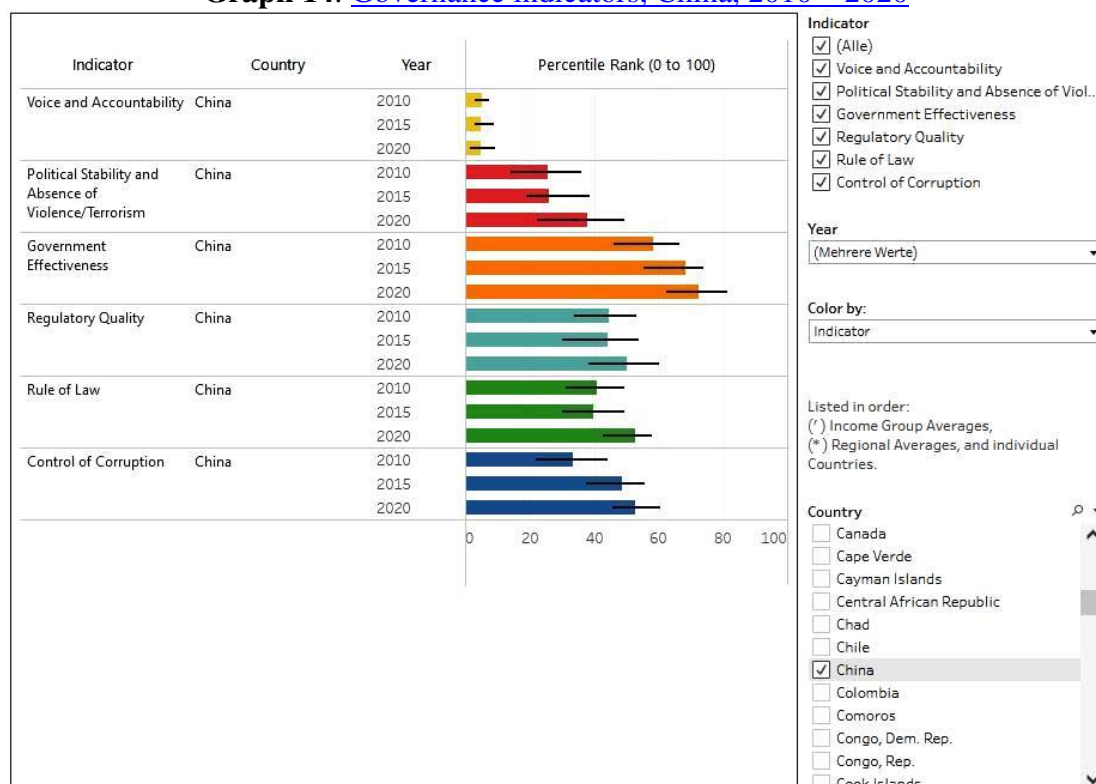
**Graph 13: Governance indicators East Asia, 2010 – 2020**



Source: Kaufmann D., A. Kraay, and M. Mastruzzi (2010), *The Worldwide Governance Indicators: Methodology and Analytical Issues* - [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=1682130](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1682130)

Source: World Bank

**Graph 14: Governance indicators, China, 2010 – 2020**



Source: Kaufmann D., A. Kraay, and M. Mastruzzi (2010), *The Worldwide Governance Indicators: Methodology and Analytical Issues* - [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=1682130](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1682130)

Source: World Bank

Also, when it comes to poverty reduction, China, which meanwhile counts among the upper-middle-income countries, does better than India, the latter still belonging to the lower-middle-income countries according to World Bank ranking. This may be due to the more pronounced policy of Beijing to counteract poverty but also to the general effects of China's more export-oriented development strategy, resulting in faster industrialization and urbanization than India. To reduce poverty, a prime task of governments in developing countries, the administration should prioritize employment generation in secondary and tertiary industries through industrialization and globalization to absorb surplus agricultural labour, helping reduce poverty in the rural areas (Zhang, et al., 2020). Thus, in the first year of the Corona pandemic in India, about 75 million people fell into poverty, accounting for 60 % of the global rise in poverty, whereas China had to admit only 1 million additional poor. The total number of Indian poor now stands at 134 million (Kapur, 2021).

Yet, competing Asian global players like India did not only perform badly in reducing poverty but also cultivated even more pronounced racism, including mounting Afrophobia (Kohnert, 2021). Thus, all other things being equal, China may have in future a competitive edge in the global quest for Africa's resources and markets, because African governments react quite touchy to racism in international foreign relations and international trade.

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**Résumé :** *Le sort des migrants africains en Chine : L'afrophobie entrave la course de la Chine pour les ressources et les marchés de l'Afrique*

Le tissu social du pays d'accueil du migrant incarne en grande partie des traits majeurs de l'exclusion des « étrangers ». Ces derniers se concentrent souvent sur l'ethnicité, la race, la religion, l'orientation sexuelle et le genre. Cela vaut aussi pour l'Afrophobie qui se répand dans la Chine contemporaine. Ainsi, l'actualité s'est focalisée sur l'expulsion des migrants africains des appartements et des hôtels de Guangzhou. On estime actuellement à 500 000 le nombre d'Africains vivant en Chine. La pandémie de COVID-19 a aggravé la situation. Les tactiques hésitantes de l'administration chinoise ont posé des défis particuliers aux Africains à la recherche de permis de séjour, de renouvellement de visa ou d'autres changements de statut. Ils dépendent de réseaux informels ou illégaux pour pouvoir rester dans le pays. L'Union africaine, divers gouvernements africains et même les États-Unis ont fait pression sur Pékin parce qu'il maltraite les migrants, en particulier ceux du Nigeria, du Ghana, du Kenya et de l'Ouganda. Peu de temps auparavant, cinq Nigériens auraient été testés positifs au Covid-19 à Guangzhou, la métropole surnommée « Petit Afrique » où la plupart des Africains vivent et travaillent. De nombreux étudiants africains et autres migrants Africains avaient déjà quitté la Chine lorsque l'épidémie a commencé. Les autres ont été bloqués dans le pays en raison des restrictions et ont été harcelés. Même les médias d'État chinois ont admis que les étrangers non africains, tels que les Américains et les Philippins, qui représentaient plus de la moitié des étrangers infectés vivant à Guangzhou, n'étaient pas identifiés comme des boucs émissaires. Les attaques racistes contre les Africains en Chine ont une longue tradition oppressive, associée à l'expansion du commerce de détail chinois bilatéral en Afrique subsaharienne dès les années 2000 et à l'afflux ultérieur de petits commerçants africains en Chine. Déjà en 2008, des migrants africains ont bloqué une route principale à Guangzhou pour protester contre la mort d'un Nigérian lors d'un raid sur l'immigration.

**Zusammenfassung :** *Die Misere afrikanischer Migranten in China: Afrophobie behindert Chinas Rennen um Afrikas Ressourcen und Märkte*

Das soziale Gefüge des Aufnahmelandes des Migranten verkörpert bereits weitgehend wesentliche Merkmale der Ausgrenzung von „Fremden“. Diese Merkmale konzentrieren sich oft auf ethnische Zugehörigkeit, Rasse, Religion, sexuelle Orientierung und Geschlecht. Dies gilt auch für die Afrophobie, die sich im heutigen China ausbreitet. So konzentrierten sich die aktuellen Nachrichten auf die Vertreibung afrikanischer Migranten aus Wohnungen und Hotels in Guangzhou. Derzeit leben schätzungsweise 500.000 Afrikaner in China. Die Coronapandemie hat ihre Lage verschärft. Die hinhaltende Taktik der chinesischen Verwaltung stellte diejenigen Afrikaner vor besondere Herausforderungen, die auf der Suche nach Aufenthaltsgenehmigungen, Visaerneuerungen oder anderen Statusänderungen sind. Sie sind auf informelle oder illegale Netzwerke angewiesen, um im Land bleiben zu können. Die Afrikanische Union, verschiedene afrikanische Regierungen und sogar die Vereinigten Staaten haben Peking wegen der Misshandlung von Migranten, vor allem aus Nigeria, Ghana, Kenia und Uganda, kritisiert. Kurz zuvor waren Berichten zufolge fünf Nigerianer in Guangzhou, der Metropole mit dem Spitznamen „Kleinafrika“, in der die meisten Afrikaner leben und arbeiten, positiv auf Covid-19 getestet worden. Viele afrikanische Studenten und andere Migranten hatten China bereits zu Beginn des Pandemie-Ausbruchs verlassen. Der Rest strandete angesichts der Coronabeschränkungen im Lande und wurde schikaniert. Selbst chinesische Staatsmedien gaben zu, dass nicht-afrikanische Ausländer, wie Amerikaner und Filipinos, die mehr als die Hälfte der in Guangzhou lebenden infizierten Ausländer ausmachten, nicht als Sündenböcke identifiziert wurden. Rassistische Angriffe auf Afrikaner in China haben eine bedrückend lange Tradition, die mit der Ausweitung des bilateralen Kleinhandels von Chinesen in Subsahara-Afrika Anfang der 2000er und dem anschließenden Zustrom afrikanischer Kleinhändler nach China zusammenhängt. Bereits 2008 blockierten afrikanische Migranten eine Hauptstraße in Guangzhou, um gegen den Tod eines Nigerianers bei einer Einwanderungsrazzia zu protestieren.

# 非洲移民在中国的困境： 针对非洲人的种族主义阻碍中国争夺非洲资源和市场

Dirk Kohnert<sup>8</sup>

一个非洲恐惧症中国卡通的例子



来源：[reddit, r/modern propaganda](https://www.reddit.com/r/modern_propaganda), 2020年<sup>9</sup>

**摘要：**移民东道国的社会结构在很大程度上体现了排斥“陌生人”的主要特征。后者通常关注民族、种族、宗教、性取向和性别。这也适用于在当代中国蔓延的非洲恐惧症。因此，当前的新闻重点是从中国的公寓和酒店驱逐非洲移民。实际上，估计有50万非洲人生活在中国。冠状病毒大流行加剧了他们的处境。中国移民援助的低效率给寻求获得居留许可、续签签证或以其他方式修改身份的非洲人带来了挑战。他们必须依靠非正式或非法网络才能留在该国。非洲联盟、非洲各国政府甚至美国都向北京施压，要求其停止对主要来自尼日利亚、加纳、肯尼亚和乌干达的移民的虐待。他们大多居住在有“小非洲”之称的广州。许多非洲学生和其他移民在冠状病毒大流行开始时就已经离开了中国。剩余的移民受到种族主义偏见的虐待和虐待。就连中国官方媒体也承认，美国人和菲律宾人等非非洲外国人并没有被单挑为替罪羊，他们在广州居住的外国人中占一半以上。然而，在中国对非洲人的种族主义攻击有着令人沮丧的悠久传统，这与自2000年代初以来中国人在撒哈拉以南非洲的双边小额贸易扩大以及随后非洲商人涌入中国有关。

**关键词：**中国、非洲、国际移民、仇外心理、仇外心理、种族主义、政治暴力、中非关系、非正规部门、非法移民、强迫移民、奴隶贸易、少数民族、汇款

**JEL 代码：**F16、F22、F24、F51、F54、I24、I31、J46、J61、N15、N35、O15、O17、O53、Z13

<sup>8</sup> Dirk Kohnert, 汉堡 [GIGA](https://www.giga.de/) 非洲事务研究所副所长（已退休）。草案：2022年1月13日

<sup>9</sup> 发表者 [u/friendly](https://www.reddit.com/user/ufriendly/), 发布，2020年，谴责一部具有非洲恐惧症和种族主义的排外中国漫画，标题为：“长期留在中国；在人们面前赞美中国，而在每个人背后在互联网上谈论中国的狗屎”。…… OEPEQY 指的是“附加上下文：“涂抹（某人）”一词，在此翻译为“谈论狗屎”，是“黑”，这也意味着“黑色”。这可能是种族文字游戏的一种形式”（来源：OEPEQY, [reddit, r/modern propaganda](https://www.reddit.com/r/modern_propaganda), 2020年）。这幅漫画是指中国业主和市政当局在经历了数月的封锁后将非洲租户赶出公寓的野蛮政策（Asiedu, 2020）。