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Letter From Africa

Chinese Take a Turn at Turning a Sub-Saharan Profit

By LYDIA POLGREEN

DAKAR, Senegal, Aug. 17 — The Boulevard du Centenaire was once the preferred address of a certain class of this city's Paris-educated elite — the career civil servants, university administrators and other upper-level functionaries of the vast state bureaucracy.

These days the street, one of the loveliest in this seaside capital, is more likely to be home to Chinese merchants who sell shoes, electronics, plastic jewelry and toys from storefronts built into Centenaire's grand old villas.

[China](#), it seems, is suddenly everywhere in Africa, not just in oil-rich states. Trade between Africa and China has almost quadrupled since 2001, and last year reached almost \$40 billion.

China is hardly the first nation to seek its fortune in Africa. First the Arabs and then the Europeans built empires on African riches and sweat, followed by the cold warriors, fighting proxy ideological battles for influence and profit.

Through all the iterations of the world's engagement with Africa, most of its nations have remained stuck in an economic trap in which they primarily supply valuable raw materials to the developed world while serving as a marketplace for cheap manufactured goods.

But China seems to be offering Africa something new, a straightforward business relationship between equals based on mutual interest and noninterference in the internal affairs of its allies. Or as the economist Jeffrey Sachs put it at a conference in Beijing this week, "China gives fewer lectures and more practical help."

But is China's interest in Africa truly different from that of the earlier powers? Or is Beijing, as some are beginning to say, peddling the same exploitative formula in an attractive dressing of third world solidarity?

Certainly, China sees itself as offering something superior to the standard Western prescription. “Now African countries have more choices,” said Lu Shaye, China’s ambassador to Senegal. “They have the panaceas of the [World Bank](#) and the [I.M.F.](#), and at the same time the experience of China. They can compare and choose the best.”

China’s recent history presents seductive possibilities for sub-Saharan Africa. In the past two decades, China has pulled hundreds of millions of its people out of poverty and transformed itself from an agrarian backwater into the world’s fastest-growing economy.

Its presence is certainly greatest in the resource-rich countries like Nigeria, Angola and Sudan (where its role has been criticized as contributing to the crisis in Darfur).

But China’s growing presence is also manifest in less obvious spots. In Sierra Leone, Chinese companies have built and renovated hotels and restaurants. In Mozambique, Chinese companies are investing in soybean processing and prawn production. At the [African Union](#) summit meeting in Banjul, Gambia, last month, the Chinese delegation dwarfed the ones sent by France, Britain and the United States.

Here in Senegal, a country whose economy was long dominated by peanut farming, Chinese construction companies are working on roads, bridges, waterworks and other projects. Small-scale Chinese enterprises have sprung up, importing inexpensive manufactured goods, and running restaurants and Chinese medical clinics.

But the economic history of African nations is a cautionary tale of exploitation and failed schemes to transform the continent’s rich endowment of resources into wealth for its people — even in the decades after the depredations of the colonial and imperialist eras.

In the post-independence era, the fad was state control aimed at rapid industrialization, an expensive and generally badly managed experiment in most countries. In the post-Soviet world, many adopted the “Washington consensus,” of open markets, macroeconomic stability, loosened state controls and more transparent government.

Whether these prescriptions have helped African economies, or been carried out to a sufficient extent, is a subject of much debate. Some countries have doubled growth rates and most have inflation under control. But many Africans say economic reform has yet to improve their lives and have grown disenchanted with the West.

“The West has closed its doors to us,” said Amadou Niang, a Senegalese forestry expert working in Mali on a [United Nations](#) development project. “Even if we follow their plans, at the end of the day their interests are more important.”

In addition, he said, Chinese technology and expertise are more relevant and affordable, and Chinese

cultural values are closer to Africa's.

Moussa Lamine Sane, a Senegalese executive at Henan Chine, a Chinese construction company in Dakar, said the West was too paternal in its approach. "Senegal is in a position where it is not necessarily in need of a tutor, but it is in need of friends," Mr. Sane said. "It is no longer a question of colonizer and colonized. It is an exchange."

But it may be too soon to say that China will be different. A study published this year concluded that China's main interest in Africa so far has been raw materials. "China has predominantly imported a limited number of products — mostly oil and hard commodities," the report said. In return, it said, China mainly exports manufactured goods.

In other words, China has done pretty much what the rest of the world has done in Africa, but without the moralizing about good government and fighting corruption.

Indeed, the Chinese model could prove deceptive and destructive.

"I think the strongest argument you can make for China's growth is that you had some very capable people in charge of making economic decisions who were given a mandate insulated from political thinking," said Todd Moss, a senior fellow at the Center for Global Development in Washington, which studies aid and growth. "But in Africa, there is no place where economic thinking is insulated from political thinking."

But whatever role China ultimately plays, perhaps the most important element it introduces is competition. The West has for too long relied on one set of ideas aimed at fixing Africa's problems, said Duncan Green, head of research at the British aid organization Oxfam.

"For Africans it is quite a welcome change from the approach they get from Western governments that manages to be both patronizing and demeaning at the same time," Mr. Green said. "I think we underestimate the importance of having an alternative to a single path."

Elizabeth Dickinson contributed reporting for this article.

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