

# China's Second Continent: How a Million Migrants Are Building a New Empire in Africa

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[ China's Second Continent: How a Million Migrants Are Building a New Empire in Africa  
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HOWARD W. FRENCH wrote from Africa for The Washington Post and The New York Times. At the Times, he was bureau chief in Latin America and the Caribbean, West and Central Africa, Japan and China. He is the recipient of two Overseas Press Club awards, and a two-time Pulitzer Prize nominee. The author of *A Continent for the Taking: The Tragedy and Hope of Africa*, and *Disappearing Shanghai: Images and Poems of an Intimate Way of Life*, he has written for The New York Times Magazine, Atlantic, The New York Review of Books, and Rolling Stone, among other national publications. He is on the faculty of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism and lives in New York. After days of coordinating with me over patchy cell phone connections, Hao Shengli arrived in Mozambique's capital city of Maputo. He'd come to load up on supplies and to collect me for the long ride back to the farmland he owned in a remote southern part of the country.

When his white Toyota pickup stopped in front of my hotel, Hao was barking into his phone. He was in a hurry, and he was angry. There was a brisk handshake, followed by a lot more shouting in salty Chinese as he struggled to make himself understood by a countryman from whom, I could grasp, he wanted to buy goods.

"China is a big fucking mess with all of its "fucking dialects," Hao said to me in English after hanging up.

As I stood there, already sweating in the midmorning heat, Hao began to train his abuse on John, his tall and sinewy Mozambican driver, who had been coolly smoking a cigarette while rearranging the supplies on the Toyota's flatbed to make room for my bags.

"You, cabe? a n? o bom, motherfucker," he said. The final curse came in Chinese: he'd employed three languages in one short and brutal sentence.

Having overheard me speaking Spanish to the driver and assumed it to be Portuguese, he pleaded with me to help him translate. "Could you please explain to this motherfucker where we need to go? We've got to get out of here. We need to be on the road."

For more than a decade, the Chinese government has invested hugely in Africa. The foundation for this partnership was laid in 1996, when President Jiang Zemin proposed the creation of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in a speech at the Organization of African Unity headquarters in Addis Ababa. Four years later, FOCAC convened triumphantly for the first time, gathering leaders from forty-four African countries in Beijing. China pledged, among other things, to double assistance to the continent, create a \$5 billion African development fund, cancel outstanding debt, build new facilities to house the OAU (later replaced by the African Union), create "trade and economic zones" around the continent, build thirty hospitals and a hundred rural schools, and train 15,000 African professionals. Fitch Ratings estimated that China's Export-Import Bank extended \$67.2 billion in loans to sub-Saharan African countries between 2001 and

2010-\$12.5 billion more than the World Bank.

Although there are no official figures, evidence suggests that at least a million private Chinese citizens have arrived on African soil since 2001, many entirely of their own initiative, not by way of any state plan. This "human factor" has done as much as any government action to shape China's image in Africa and condition its ties to the continent. By the time I met Hao, in early 2011, merchants in Malawi, Namibia, Senegal, and Tanzania were protesting the influx of Chinese traders. In the gold-producing regions of southern Ghana, government officials were expelling Chinese wildcat miners. And in Zambia, where recent Chinese arrivals had established themselves in almost every lucrative sector of the economy, their presence had become a contentious issue in national elections.

As we left the capital, we passed the new national stadium, nearing completion by Chinese work crews at the edge of town. Built to support the country's bid to host the 2013 continent-wide Africa Cup of Nations, it was a showcase gift from the Chinese government, intended as a statement of generosity and solidarity. China has become an avid practitioner of this kind of prestige-project diplomacy. I asked Hao whether a \$65 million stadium was the best sort of gift for Mozambique, one of the ten poorest countries in the world.

"Chinese government projects in Mozambique have all failed," he said. "That's because the Chinese ganbu [bureaucrats] don't know how to communicate on the same level with the blacks." He shook his head and wagged a stubby index finger excitedly.

I asked him about his early days in the country. A prior attempt to do business overseas, in Dubai, had gone bad. Chinese agricultural experts there who had been on African aid missions planted a very powerful idea in his mind: Go to Africa, where you can acquire good land cheaply. He had flown to Maputo alone, and no one had greeted him at the airport. "I didn't understand a fucking word that was being said to me." On his own, he made his way into town and found a flophouse. Making little headway—he spoke neither Portuguese nor English—he soon gave in to the temptation to call up some fellow Chinese he had found online while still in China.

"I thought if I met a few people I could distract myself a bit, learn about the situation from them, and then figure out how to get some land. But I quickly discovered that not all Chinese people are your friends. The Chinese folks here, or at least a portion of them, a big portion of them, are really bad characters. They are looking for a way to get hold of your money. Yeah, they'll do any thing for you, but they won't do anything for free. It's all about money."

Hao had naively loaned money to various Chinese people he met who seemed to have fallen on hard times and offered to help guide him. A few months later, having been burned by several such encounters, he left for the countryside, following the very route we were taking northward.

When he reached the southern part of Inhambane province, he said, he contacted the

provincial government about acquiring land, and they directed him to local officials. He found some who were receptive, and he set about ingratiating himself by helping on road and bridge-repair projects.

"I took charge of the work all by myself," he said proudly. "In the end, I was able to secure a piece of land."

Hao had scored big, but before long there were other things to worry about. He hadn't thought much about the people who lived on the land or controlled it before he came along, or even who his neighbors were. After a period of warm enough hospitality, people from nearby villages began to ask him how he had gotten the land and to demand compensation, with some of them, claiming the area was an ancestral holding.

"The local people are really not friendly. They are peasants, and they resent the idea that the government took their land and gave it to us. They have no land for themselves. They're not comfortable. They are working for us, and they are not comfortable with it. In fact, the Mozambique government has given us land, but it's not forever. After a few years, once we've put the land to good use, perhaps they will take another tack and try to reclaim it from us. But we've got our own ideas. We're also making plans."

The first-person plural had been creeping into his banter, but only now did its significance become clear.

"I have been bringing my children here," he said. "My older son, my younger son, eventually my daughter. I'm taking them out of school in China and bringing them all here. Within the next ten or so years we need to raise enough money, and then if my son has a lot of offspring with local girls—my two sons, in fact, if they've had lots of children—well, what do the children become! Are they Chinese or Mozambicans?"

Hao told me his older son already had a live-in African girlfriend. Then he proceeded to answer his own question. "The mothers are Mozambicans, but the land will be within our family. Do you get it! This means that because the children will be Mozambicans they can't treat us as foreigners. If need be we can even put the property in their name, protectively, but it will remain ours. It will be in my clan."

Hao said that his older son had been with him on his newly acquired land for about half a year now. His younger son, who was fourteen, had joined them a few weeks earlier. "The older boy is doing fine already," he said, with evident pride. "He's doing a lot of training."

"Training?"

"I'm guiding him," he said. "It's not hard physical labor. I have to encourage him, have him fool around a bit, catch some fish, shoot a gun, hunt some birds. Boom, boom! That way he'll be happy. He already shoots well."

I told him that his son's experience seemed to mirror the way youth were treated in the

Cultural Revolution, when schools were closed and young people were "sent down" by the millions to work alongside peasants in the countryside. .

"That's how I was raised. Young people in China today no longer learn how to chi ku," he said. The expression means to "eat bitterness," to endure great hardship. "I want my son to become a real man, a worthy person."

After a couple hours' on the road, we dropped John off at the main square of Maxixe, a snoozy little drive-through town that nonetheless enjoys the status of economic capital of Inhambane. John, who was from Maxixe, spoke happily about being able to sleep at home with his family after several days away. His main employers, a group of road builders from Hao's home province of Henan, shared a house just off the narrow main road. When Hao invited me into their home, he introduced them as lao xiang, people from his hometown or region, a connection that resonates deeply for many overseas Chinese. Hao's friends lived in a modern, one-story villa with a large living room and a kitchen in the back, from which emanated the very distinctive aromas of a home-cooked Chinese dinner. In the living room, which had the feel of a frat house, two men and a woman were hunched in nearly identical poses over laptops, each at a separate cheap desk, connecting with friends in China.

I secretly hoped that we would be asked to stay for dinner. The traditionally generous hospitality I was accustomed to from traveling in China seemed to make this a safe bet, but no invitation came. Hao talked business with one of the Henan road men in an adjacent bedroom and then we were on our way, with Hao at the wheel. His banter picked up again as he spoke of the utility of having friends, especially lao xiang like this, living nearby.

"I've only gotten sick once since I've been here, but it was malaria, and it was a very bad case," he told me. "I'm lucky that they came looking for me. I was laid out flat on my back at my farm, all alone, sweating and shivering there in my own vomit. They took me right away to the hospital, and I'm told that this saved my life."

The full moon had risen high in the sky, and we had begun slicing through little townships every few minutes as the population density of the area increased. There were glimpses of prayer vigils in clapboard churches; smoky, ramshackle saloons filled with garrulous drinkers; women sitting by the roadside wrapped in printed shawls, hunched, half asleep over storm lanterns as they awaited nighttime buyers. All this activity signaled a city was nearby. Hao announced with relief that we were about to enter Massinga, the city nearest to his farm. I asked him how he had come to settle in Mozambique.

"I went to an African trade fair in Fujian province and there were lots of Chinese businesspeople there," he said. "I got excited by all the talk of business opportunities in Africa. Later I figured my English is no good, though, so I got the idea that if I went to an English-speaking country, English being a popular language, Chinese people would be everywhere.

"I'll be damned if I understood Portuguese, but damn it, I figured, neither do most-

Chinese people in general, so what the fuck? There must be great undiscovered opportunities there, and I won't have to be constantly looking over my shoulder for other Chinese coming to compete with me, cheat me out of my money, or steal my ideas."

As we pulled into Massinga, Hao announced, almost sheepishly, a major change of plans. He had decided to have me sleep at a cheap hotel rather than, host me himself. He had been unable to reach his son, he said, to make sure there was dinner waiting for us, and this way I'd be sure to have an evening meal.

In the courtyard of the roadside hotel, we sat at a plastic table with an exposed bulb above us and ordered a late dinner. While we waited for the food, Hao asked me for the third time that day about my itinerary. I told him I'd just been in Ethiopia and that the next country on my itinerary was Namibia.

"What is Namibia?" he asked.

I drew him a crude map in my spiral note; book. "Ethiopia is up here," I said, pointing to the continent's northeastern shoulder. "Mozambique is here. And Namibia is over here. It's on the Atlantic coast." Hao wanted to know how far away that placed Namibia from where we were. Several hundred miles, I said.

I started to fill in the map to show him some of the other countries I planned to visit.

When I sketched Senegal's position, at the continent's westernmost point, I added Europe, tracing it's downward slope toward Africa.

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