



Small and Medium-sized Chinese Businesses in Mali and Senegal

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Abstract

The two cases studies presented and compared allow for a better understanding of the development of Chinese small and medium sized businesses in Africa. Through the analysis of the Chinese businessmen's life stories, the article stresses the diversity of situation in explaining the Chinese presence, giving importance to the national context.

Keywords

Mali; Senegal; Chinese; Africa; case study; SMEs

1 Introduction

In Mali and Senegal, many media articles have been written on the small and medium-sized Chinese businesses. The national newspapers regularly put them on the front page. The headlines are eye-catching and the tone of the articles is often critical. The Chinese are accused of unfair competition, tax and tariff fraud, and disrespect of labor rights. Certain articles openly criticize the lax attitude of the authorities, as in the case of the "Chinese bars" at Bamako.¹ Other reports echo complaints of consumers about the bad quality

* I take this opportunity here to stress that I am greatly indebted to Benoît Vulliet guiding me through these countries that were previously unfamiliar to me. He assists me to conduct this field research; nevertheless, I design the research and conduct myself all the interviews mostly in Chinese and only the author is responsible for the content of this article.

¹ Ténéko KONE «Casse-Tête des bars chinois au Mali: Environ une centaine, rien qu'à Bamako», *Maliweb*, 16/03/2007, <http://www.maliweb.net/category.php?NID=17019>, consulté le 5 octobre 2009; see also F. Bourdarias (2009) for her contribution in the issue.

of Chinese products. Undoubtedly, the Chinese presence generates a debate in the media, but also within large segments of the population, as shown the numerous stories and rumors that circulate about them.

Despite the passion that they have aroused in Africa as in Europe, the Chinese small and medium enterprises (SMEs) still remain relatively unknown. One of the reasons is certainly linked to the entrepreneurs' limited understanding of foreign languages. This is obvious when carrying out interviews in Chinese; the Chinese entrepreneurs turned out to be very talkative, and even friendlier and more cooperative than their counterparts in Beijing's markets. The first objective of this article is to reconsider common beliefs about Chinese migrants in Africa who are usually perceived as mysterious as portrayed in mainstream movies, such as the James Bond series.

Furthermore, the life stories collected from the Chinese businessman in Mali and Senegal enable us to differentiate this group from other segments of the Chinese presence, such as expatriate workers of Chinese multinational enterprises and people working for embassy or cooperation programs. As emphasized by E. Hsu (2008) for Zanzibar, the proximity to the Chinese government constitutes a dividing line among the Chinese residents. It is even stronger in Mali and Senegal due to its juxtaposition with social and/or regional differences. Therefore, beyond the rivalries and conflicts exacerbated by a fierce competition, the small and medium sized businessman can be analyzed as a specific group among the Chinese in Africa.

The interviews conducted, as a comparison between Mali and Senegal, allows us to begin to postulate a sociology of these new actors in these African economies. In addition to the distinct provincial origins, the economic importance of these two groups of similar dimension is very uneven. In Senegal, most of them remain confined in wholesale or retail business of basic consumables. In Mali, business activities of small private Chinese entrepreneurs are much more diversified. This finding raises the importance of both the impact of the different social and political contexts, and the history of Chinese presence in each African country. Undoubtedly, for these reasons in particular, the settlement of the Chinese small businessmen is configured in very different modalities in each country.

The choice of studying Mali and Senegal can be justified by the intention of choosing those countries who do not figure in the new version of the "Great Game" or the "New Scramble for Africa". Without major raw materials, the Chinese presence in these countries is not over-determined by oil or mineral interests. Other elements have also intervened in the choice, including the desire to examine French speaking African countries, which are still largely unexplored in the field of China/Africa studies.

2 Where Are All the Chinese We Read About?

Given the interest dedicated to the China in Africa phenomenon in the media and academic community, I expected, before setting foot in Africa, to see a massive Chinese presence there. It is true that estimates made by various researchers vary quite considerably. If all stress the rapid increase of Chinese migration to Africa, the absence of reliable data is also quite evident. The only researchers I know of who set themselves the task of coming up with a serious estimation are Barry Sautman and Yoon Jung Park. Sautman (2006) first tried to update the University of Ohio 2001 database figure of "136,865"² with information drawn from the regional media and his own fieldwork. This enabled him to come up with a revised estimation of between 220,000 and 427,000 Chinese migrants for the whole of Africa. The quite important difference between the two numbers is due to the difficulty of giving precise estimations of the number of Chinese nationals in South Africa (numbers vary between 100,000 and 300,000). Park (2009) has more recently taken advantage of the growing number of research on this given topic to update Sautman's data: her own estimates set the numbers of Chinese nationals at between 583,050 and 820,050. Such a rapid increase does not mean that Chinese migration to Africa is a wholly new phenomenon: some of the most extended Chinese communities in Africa, such as those residing in South Africa or Mauritius, actually have roots reaching back several generations.

Chinese migration to Mali and Senegal is comparatively recent, as the first migrants did not arrive before the mid-1990s. But links can nevertheless be made with Chinese migration to elsewhere in the world. Administrative procedures for obtaining a passport in China were made easier in the 1990s, opening travel to a much more diversified group of Chinese than scholars and those with family already overseas. This change has generated an increase in Chinese emigration and the emergence of new destinations such as Eastern Europe and Africa (Nyiri 2003).

In 2007, Chinese embassy officials in both Mali and Senegal articulated a figure of about a thousand Chinese nationals for each country. Such a calculation usually includes those who hold a residential permit granted on a private basis, but not those who reside in these two countries on government business (aid workers, embassy personnel), or temporary workers engaged in construction projects.³

² http://www.library.ohiou.edu/subjects/shao/databases_popdis.htm.

³ Interviews in Bamako with Mr. Xia WU, First Secretary of the Chinese Embassy in Mali,

The Chinese embassies in both Mali and Senegal may indeed, whether deliberately or through a lack of information, have slightly underestimated the number of Chinese nationals present in the two countries. On the basis of my own investigation, there are likely between 1,000 and 2,000 Chinese nationals in each country, so that the Chinese embassies' numbers seem to be realistic. In any case, and despite the lack of full and accurate figures, it is obvious that what we are dealing with here are very small communities.

Reasons for the relatively small Chinese community in Senegal may be found in the fact that Senegal's diplomatic relations with China were only restored after a 25 year interruption, in 2005. Mali, on the other hand, has maintained good diplomatic relations with China since the 1960s, but remains overall a poor country with a small population, and so is a less important market.

3 Types and Locations of Chinese Businesses in Mali and Senegal

In both Mali and Senegal, Chinese private businesses seem to be concentrated in the capital.⁴ Local shopkeepers come to the Chinese retailers and wholesale dealers in both places for their supplies, which they then carry to resell in the rest of the two countries and sometimes even in countries which are part of the same sub-region. But these are surface similarities; Chinese businesses in Mali and Senegal are otherwise radically different in terms of activities.

3.1 Bamako

Chinese business localization is less noticeable in Bamako than in Dakar, since it is dispersed over several districts in the city centre; but the businesses themselves cover a wide range of activities. I had been repeatedly told that there was no "Chinatown" in Bamako; however, a small group of about a dozen Chinese shops can be found near the central market, behind the main mosque. More precisely, Chinese shopkeepers have rented space for 6 or 7 shops in a rather modern three- to four-storey high building facing the train station. In adjacent lanes, there are several more shops held by Chinese. These shops are all active in wholesale and retail trade, but each has a distinct line

on 21.08.2007, and in Dakar with Mr. Tongqing WANG, Commercial Attaché of the Chinese Embassy in Senegal, on 30.08.2007.

⁴ Chinese firms may also be found in Mali in such medium-sized towns such as Ségou or Sikasso but not in Senegal. There are no Chinese nationals in Saint-Louis or Thiès.

of products. Among these dozen shops, Mr. Ye,⁵ originally from Fujian, has a flourishing business selling men's shoes. Next door, Mr. Li, who recently arrived from Beijing, has gone into women's shoes. In the same building, there is an import-export company from Shanghai with a staff of 5 to 6 persons (not counting the local employees), which specializes in trading clothing fabric. In the building facing the train station, Mr. Xu, sells hairpieces while Mrs. Xu sells vases, plastic flowers, garlands of flowers and lights and Mr. Zhu, machines for printing photos and doing other small printing work. In an adjacent lane, Mrs. Wang, who speaks a bit of Bambara, sells medicine, while her husband sells fabric next to her. Further down the street, her young cousin has just set up a shop specializing in prayer mats as well as photographic reproductions of Mecca and great Malian mullahs. A bit isolated but still in the same area, there is "Tokyo Color," which functions as a supermarket for the Chinese community and a small fringe of wealthy locals. Further down is Mrs. Liu, who sells 3-wheeled scooters and air conditioners.

The activities of Chinese nationals in Mali and Senegal are not restricted, however, to the retail- and wholesale businesses, but cover a number of other sectors. For example, the market share occupied by Chinese nationals in the hotel and restaurant business is the most spectacular: there are now 75 business establishments of this kind in the capital of Mali alone.⁶ A vast majority of such establishments, however, are called "Chinese bars". Very similar to Japanese *love hotel*, the clients are diverse. It could be unmarried couples, extra-marital affairs, or men engaged in commercial sex with sex workers. In the one visited, service seems to have been limited to the rental of rooms, which were furnished according to the modern Chinese standard with both air-conditioner and television. The local prostitutes wait for some of the clients some distance away along a well-lit street. The customers of these "bars" are relatively affluent and arrive by car at the hotels. The most striking feature of such places is the value put on discretion; the places themselves are relatively dark and have a number of different entrances, presumably to keep the one-time visitors from running into each other.

Other than this kind of "hotel-restaurants," there are two or three "real" Chinese restaurants in town, which cater mostly to wealthy and foreign customers. In a more upscale category, the old Hotel Komoguel has been recently taken over and completely renovated by a Chinese entrepreneur, Mr. Thieble Zhang. Such a place offers sophisticated Chinese cuisine, rumored to

⁵ Real names of the businessmen have been replaced with pseudonyms.

⁶ Interview with the person in charge of the Association of Chinese Nationals in Mali, 23 August 2007 in Bamako.

be much appreciated by both the President and other Malian elites. Its rather small private lounges provide customers with some quiet space. The relatively huge building has room also for a nightclub and billiard room. Some of the personnel, including the restaurant's waitress staff, is Chinese.

Chinese businessmen are also actively involved in the construction sector. There are dozens of large civil engineering firms, including subsidiaries of CGC,⁷ CWE,⁸ CSCEC,⁹ or COVEC,¹⁰ which are usually responsible for large construction projects and other technologically demanding work. These State Own Enterprises (SOEs) are often involved in Chinese and international construction cooperation projects. In addition, currently there are about forty other much smaller private construction companies. These construction SMEs employ an exclusively local workforce while their managers are all Chinese. They are situated in direct competition with the local companies. Such Chinese firms are generally regarded as being cheaper (by around 30%), offering better quality work, and meeting deadlines.

As in Cameroon, there are at least a dozen Chinese clinics in Bamako, which are appreciated for their doctors' skills and low consultation fees. These clinics do not exclusively practice Chinese traditional medicine; they are rather places where one can buy all kind of medicines made in China.

Residential accommodation for Chinese shopkeepers and businessmen is distributed among different districts of Bamako. Some business people stayed when they first arrived in the special "compounds" built by the large Chinese state-owned companies in Mali, such as the one built by COVEC mid-way up "Knowledge Hill." Once they had settled in, however, most of them chose to rent houses in the central residential area, sometimes moving in together with others. Their presence is therefore not very visible in Bamako.

3.2 *Dakar*

In Dakar, by way of contrast, the Chinese community has "clustered" along the Papa Gueye Fall Avenue, where 28 Chinese shops could be found, and particularly along its extension, the Boulevard General De Gaulle, where about 130 shops are situated. To give an idea of its symbolic dimension, some people regard the Boulevard as the "Champs-Élysées" of Dakar. The smaller houses along the Boulevard and Avenue, in what was formerly a residential area, have now almost all been rented by or sold to Chinese businessmen.

⁷ China Geo Engineering Corporation, <http://www.chinageo.com.cn>.

⁸ China International Water Electric corporation, <http://www.cwe.cn>.

⁹ China State Construction Engineering Corporation, <http://www.cscec.com.cn>.

¹⁰ China National Overseas Engineering Corporation, <http://www.covec.com>.

The people have settled themselves in the old houses. Today, there are about 160 Chinese shops lining both sides of these two main streets in Dakar.

The reasons for choosing such a location seem to be the relatively high rental cost of the main commercial lanes in the city centre, as well as the difficulty of finding other available space generally. Such a concentration of Chinese businessmen in what remains a busy central area provides a rather high visibility to their activities and has also contributed to the emergent anti-Chinese discourse in Senegal.

The paradox is that not only are the Chinese nationals very few in number, but they have also restricted their activities to peripheral business areas. Furthermore, their businesses are heavily concentrated and tend to focus on the same economic sectors. Very similar products are sold on this strip of shops: sandals, fashion accessories (belts, necklaces, head gear), T-shirts and hairpieces. Given such a narrow range of products, it is not very surprising that the shopkeepers complain about the intense competition and low profit margin. With their low prices, these retailers and wholesalers are certainly targeting a rather large customer base coming not only from the city of Dakar but from outlying parts of the country as well. The very fact that they remain almost exclusively involved in the sector of cheap fashion accessories, however, demonstrates that they are only weakly and recently established. Indeed, contrary to what I found in Bamako, numerous business sectors in Dakar, even if they sell goods of primarily Chinese origin, remain in the hands of local businesspeople.¹¹ Perhaps it can be said that the merchants are merely the distributors for the clothing makers in China.

Leaving this Avenue, one finds, right in the heart of the commercial streets close to the Presidential Palace, the offices of the Datong Africa International owned by Mr. Li a Chinese businessman who settled in Senegal over 20 years ago. A little further down on the same street, Mr. Wang runs a "supermarket," a kind of home products bazaar. Two Chinese restaurants can also be found in the same downtown area, as well as a fabric shop and a shady "bar" for passing Chinese sailors, but hardly anything more in the city centre. Elsewhere in the city one may find the headquarters of the not very "Senegalese" Henan China Construction Company, two Chinese medical clinics and a restaurant opposite the embassy. This is surely not an exhaustive inventory of the Chinese businesses present in Dakar; other enterprises can be found like the fishery company in Senegal that was established since the 1980s.

¹¹ For local tradespeople, we have included Senegalese tradespeople of Lebanese origin.

The economic significance of the two Chinese “communities”, though similar by size, is not comparable. The Chinese businesses in Bamako uniformly dominate the market in all economic sectors, and its silent integration contrasts sharply with the high visibility of their peers in Dakar.

4 Migration Paths and Social Profiles of the Chinese Communities in Dakar and Bamako

Besides determining the number of persons and sectoral activities of the Chinese communities in Mali and Senegal, it is important to elaborate on their social profiles and migratory paths. These issues are particularly significant, as many rumours have been circulated about them, such as China secretly strategizing to transfer some of its excess population to Africa and construction companies employing Chinese prisoners, especially considering the Chinese workers’ phenomenal work pace.

While I do not want to give credit to African versions of the “Yellow Peril” or mere “rumours” linked to the Chinese presence, it is essential to understand who these Chinese businesspeople who have chosen to go to Africa (and in particular Mali or Senegal) are in order to debunk the idea of a deliberate centralized Chinese “population strategy” in Africa. In fact, what we find are numerous individual strategies adopted by a very diverse and unorganized set of Chinese actors.

4.1 Africa, in the Absence of a Better Choice

Africa was seldom their first choice of destination. The majority knew next to nothing about the African continent before their departure. Even today, they seem to have little or even no interest in their country of residence. They seldom step out of Bamako or Dakar. Only a few of them with an unusual profile showed some curiosity toward their environment. A lot of them would have preferred to go to either Europe or the United States, but they knew it was extremely difficult to obtain a visa to those places.

For each and all, their purpose couldn’t be clearer: as they repeatedly told us: “I’m here to make a living. If I can’t earn money, I’ll go back [to China].” Their emigration obviously reflects the current economic situation in China. Almost all the interviewees referred to the stiff competition and the difficulties they faced in trying to launch a business at home without considerable start-up capital. It seems to be relevant to link their emigration with the weakening of China’s former urban middle class. This social class had a comfortable income and a certain social status before the reform of the state-owned

enterprises started to accelerate in the mid-1990s. Many of them then chose to privatize their businesses or create new ones, under the rules that were redefined during the transition (Kernen 2004). Most of the shopkeepers and tradespeople I met belonged to the urban middle class whose situation became precarious during the transition, due to the high competitiveness of the market in China itself (Cattelain et al. 2005). These people keep dreaming about China. Mr. Chen's eyes were shining when he told about his girlfriend waiting for him back home, or about his hometown and its culinary specialties.

Mali or Senegal came into their lives simply because they knew someone who had found work there and told them about the opportunities for starting a business and earning some money in Africa. Their migration route was thus built on their proximity network, usually a family network, but sometimes a professional one. They thus travelled to Africa in order to join a brother, a cousin or, less often, a former colleague or friend who was already settled there. These relatives helped them with administrative procedures and housed them upon arrival. Some of the migrants interviewed even worked for a while for their relatives, although most arrived with a small amount of capital and could start their businesses immediately.

The Chinese migrants who have set up businesses in Dakar and Bamako did not come from the most disadvantaged regions of China. The Chinese shopkeepers and businessmen in Mali and Senegal are not of rural origin, but can be qualified as urban. It may be useful to recall that the Chinese population is administratively divided into two large categories: urban and rural.¹² In recent years the rural population has migrated in large numbers to the cities and special economic zones, but it has nevertheless retained its original status as rural, which is quite distinct from the urban one. They do the hardest and most degrading work, take the lowest-paid jobs and are excluded from the social benefits that the urban population enjoys. However, following the restructuring of the government sector in the early 1990s, once the reforms began to accelerate, this same urban population had to face unemployment for the first time. Today, the less educated ones are increasingly forced to compete with the migrant workers of rural origin. This leads to a downgrading of their social status and, sometimes, impoverishment (Rocca 2006, Kernen 2004).

¹² The residence permit (*bukou*) system set up in the 1950s for reinforcing economic planning and controlling internal migration is still in force today. Even though the system has undergone a degree of reform and relaxation since the 1980s, it still contributes to the social division between urban and rural residents.

In Mali almost all the businesspeople interviewed belong to this impoverished Chinese “middle class”. Moreover, a vast majority of the people I met has had experience in doing business, sometimes even at the international level. Several of them said that they had worked until the 1990s in state-owned import-export enterprises that had a monopoly on Chinese international trade. After losing their jobs in China, a number of them began to consider emigration as a possible solution. The origin and the profile of the Chinese migrants in Mali and Senegal seem to be quite different from other African countries. In Congo and Cameroon, for instance, a large majority of the Chinese traders are coming from Fujian and Zhejiang Provinces with more often a rural origin.

Although it is not difficult to understand how these two small Chinese communities in Africa came into existence and expanded through the new arrivals’ proximity networks, it is useful to highlight three general profiles derived from the interviews. These include: people linked with a construction or development project in the area; people sent by a company to set up a subsidiary; and “adventurers” (lone explorers in search of market opportunities).

4.2 Networks Linked with Construction and Development Projects

Although it is certainly incorrect to state that the Chinese tradespeople in Mali and Senegal are former construction workers who chose remain in these countries once their contracts were terminated, one cannot disregard the connection between the presence of those construction companies and the arrival of new Chinese tradespeople. In this regard, Senegal provides the nearly perfect example. A large proportion of the Chinese community in Dakar is from Henan province: 80% according to the Chinese embassy’s numbers. As the only large Chinese construction company in Senegal is “Henan China”,¹³ as mentioned above, there is little doubt that there is indeed a link between the presence of this company in Senegal and the overrepresentation of people from this province in Dakar. Such a connection is, however, never brought up in the media.

In several interviews, the interviewees referred in one way or another to this company, stating that a relative or a friend worked there and had facilitated the administrative procedures for their coming to Senegal. None of them told us, however, that they had ever worked for “Henan China.” The

¹³ China Henan International Development Group: <http://www.12101.com/e/about.asp?id=21>.

interviewees appeared to feel uncomfortable about this subject and avoided going into detail.

Nonetheless, the following hypothesis may be emitted. If some of the Chinese businesspeople from Henan have kinship ties with employees of the "Henan China" company in either Senegal or China, it is likely that others paid "Henan China" employees for administrative services as one of the four main activities of the Group is the international labor service. It is also possible that the company's management itself or some of its executives earn extra income by obtaining residence permits in Senegal for fellow provincials. This was likely the case when the first wave of Henan migrants reached Dakar, at a time when China did not yet have diplomatic relations with Senegal. It was necessary to have an intermediary in Dakar in order to apply in China for the required approval to settle abroad, and most people encountered had been able to get one. Only a few were "adventurers" who had ended up settling in Senegal after passing through other countries such as Guinea or the Ivory Coast.

This is just a hypothesis and a number of elements that would allow me to state it more categorically are still missing. Such a link between Chinese immigration and the construction companies already present on site also exists in Mali. It is mainly the small construction companies, which have developed in Bamako in recent years, that are involved. These companies have evolved largely from heads of larger construction firms, who have developed a sufficient feel for the existing opportunities, going out on their own. Nevertheless, from the information collected, owners of such new SMEs continue to maintain very good relations with their former employers, who sometimes subcontract out to the Chinese SMEs. This topic definitely deserves further research.

Migration to Mali has also been built on the long-standing diplomatic relations between the two countries, especially China's assistance in economic development. The development and cooperation programmes that have been put in place over several decades have created numerous connections between China and Mali. Some of the people interviewed have previously worked for one of the companies involved in such programs in Mali.

Such multiple migration paths show that, contrary to what is happening in Senegal, there are legal means for immigrating to Mali. Enterprising individuals are eligible for a residence permit if their investment in the country reaches a certain amount. Some interviewees explained that they have gone through the whole procedure with the assistance of a relative; none of them landed in Bamako without the help of a relative or a friend and the assurance of having a place to stay in the capital.

4.3 *People Sent by an Enterprise for Setting Up A Subsidiary Company*

The case of people being mandated by a Chinese company to develop business in Mali or Senegal represents a less regular immigration path. Such is the case, for example, of an import-export company based in Shanghai, which set up a branch in Bamako after opening one in Cameroon. This company did not intend to stop its African expansion there; at the time it was seriously considering further extending its business into the neighbouring Ivory Coast.

Mr. Li Jicai is a businessman in his 50s. His office is a stone's throw from the Presidential Palace in Dakar. As his physical corpulence might suggest, Mr. Li has been very successful in his business dealings in Senegal and enjoyed talking about his own experience in fluent French. In 1984, Mr. Li was sent to Senegal, where he managed the construction company's daily business and subsidiaries for several years.

Mr. Li chose to set up his own business in 1988. In its early stages, his work involved importing products that were mainly manufactured in China by state-owned enterprises. He was the first Chinese national to engage in this activity, which was largely controlled by Lebanese merchants at the time. Nowadays, he concentrates on capital goods, various materials and medicine. He does not like to be compared with the small Chinese businessmen who have recently arrived in Dakar. "We do not compete in the same category".

He tried hard to impress me with the fact that he had good connections in the higher circles of power. And as this simple allusion was not enough, he mentioned his invitation to one of the most stylish restaurants in the capital, the Café de Rome, a favorite, it seems, of the "wadjero,"¹⁴ to illustrate the point. First, the daughter of a minister came to greet him; then, a military general called him on his mobile: "Ah, hello, General, what a pleasure to receive your call!" After living in Senegal for 25 years, he admitted to having become a bit Senegalese. There is no doubt that he has mastered the way of conducting business in the country.

The most important members of this group of businessmen have been living in the two countries for a relatively long time and are familiar with the wheels of power not only in their host countries, but also in their country of origin, thanks to the numerous contacts they have with their embassy. They should not be considered as depending on the Chinese government. In the present renewal of China-Africa relations, they hold a lot of cards.

¹⁴ Contraction of the President's name, Abdulaye Wade and Pajero, the name of the most trendy 4x4. This term designates those in the entourage of Wade who take personal advantage of his presidency.

4.4 *Adventurers*

The people I call “adventurers” are not very numerous. They arrived in Dakar after travelling through other African countries without any personal link or particular assignment. My investigation shows that there are undoubtedly more “adventurers” in Dakar than in Bamako.

Mr. Lin is in his 50s and originally from Fujian. He arrived in Dakar six or seven years ago. He now has a Chinese supermarket in the centre of Dakar, located at the intersection of the Rues Victor Hugo and Moussé Diop and managed by his young son. He opened his first shops in Senegal on the Avenue du Centenaire in Dakar in the early 2000s. At that time, the competition was not as stiff as it is today and the returns from his two shops were excellent. After he opened the supermarket, he handed the management of the shops over to his brother. His business interests are not restricted to Senegal. Having spent time in other African countries during the 1990s, he has maintained a couple of shops there: one in Algeria and another in Togo. Each of the shops that he has set up in the different places have all been handed over to a close relative. Today, in spite of finding himself at the head of a small family “multinational” company, he considers himself as half-retired: “My action is limited to providing a new impetus, and for this reason I regularly visit my shops”.

Before he left for the Maghreb at the beginning of the 1990s, Mr. Lin had travelled all over China. He had gone into business after the beginning of the Chinese reforms in the 1980s. Like many others at time, he started in the garment sector. He then opened a photo shop, before launching an import-export business in timber between Qinghai, set on the foothills of the Himalayas, and China.

His son, who joined him in Senegal a few years ago, recently married a Senegalese girl, which is unusual within the Chinese communities of Mali or Senegal. They had just returned from their honeymoon trip to China, as the son “wanted to show her around China.”¹⁵ They were the only Sino-African couple I met.¹⁶ Usually a tradesman who is still unmarried takes advantage of a trip back to China to get married.

This group of tradespeople – independent, entrepreneurial, and adventurous – had thus chosen Dakar because of the opportunities they believed it offered.

¹⁵ Interview in Dakar, 31 August 2007.

¹⁶ Excluding the female Chinese doctor who had met her Malian husband in Beijing.

5 The Operational Mode of Chinese Businesses in Mali and Senegal

5.1 *Use of Local Workforce*

Inside the shops in Dakar, one often finds two or three Chinese people: the shop's owner or manager, his wife, and another person who is usually presented as a young cousin. In spite of this, the Chinese staff does not usually take front stage in the shops. Rather, you find them at the back of the shops, napping, playing some video game or chatting with a compatriot. It is clear that even when they seem to be dozing, the Chinese staff keeps an eye on the cash desk and hops up when a deal is about to be concluded. They remain in the backdrop throughout the bartering, mainly because they are unable to communicate with their clients or their employees. They are only capable of approving the selling price, which the African employee slowly announces (in French), "This, one thousand five hundred, OK?": "Yes, one thousand five hundred". Far from being ideal, this system of operation occasions misunderstandings and conflicts between the Senegalese retailers and the Chinese wholesalers. This happened one day in my presence.

Chinese tradespeople in Bamako appear more active in their businesses. Those I met were often able to speak a little French or English with their clients. Above all, there was an interpreter in each shop. Since communication was possible, the atmosphere in the shops was more relaxed. Sometimes, the boss and the African employee chat just to kill time while waiting for customers.

The reason there are people who speak Chinese in Mali is that for many years the Chinese government has granted scholarships to Malian students as part of the cooperation programmes between the two countries. While today Chinese cooperation seems to prefer providing short training periods to mid-career government officials, it nonetheless continues to send around fifty young Malians to China each year where they are expected to follow the entire university curriculum.¹⁷ Chinese tradesmen employ young graduates from Chinese universities to assist them in their shops.

Having spent four or five years in China, they are very proficient in Chinese and are a precious help in dealing with customers as well as with the government. These assistants enjoy a special status and are highly considered by their bosses. In some shops, they have taken up a deputy position and managed the shop quite naturally when their boss was absent. During the

¹⁷ According to an interview with Mr. Xai Wei, First Secretary of the Chinese Embassy in Bamako on 21 August 2007.

interview with their boss, they spontaneously took part in the conversation and were sometimes asked by their boss to provide more details. Indeed, it seemed surprising that these graduates were unable to get jobs that corresponded better to their qualifications. This is yet another of the problems related to the job market in Mali. The fact remains, nonetheless, that in an indirect way, the easy integration of Chinese business people into life in Bamako builds on the long-standing Chinese cooperation program in the country.

In addition to these “interpreters”, the Chinese shops usually employ one or two more people who are put in charge of selling and handling. As a general rule, the local staff outnumber the Chinese in Mali where there is rarely more than one Chinese man or woman in a shop. While I met with the local staff only in the presence of a Chinese person, and this of course mitigates the value of the testimonies I collected, the local staff believed they were treated no worse than in a local business. In the end, they were happy to have a job. It seems that their complaints were more about the long working hours than about the salary compared with those in other businesses. They also mentioned that their bosses worked a lot.

5.2 *Make its life in Africa*

Chinese in both countries have very different life plans. The Chinese seem to settle in well in Bamako and are satisfied with their conditions. They appreciate the calm and secure environment. They picture living in the country for a long time. It is their family concerns, rather than their business ones, that determine their long-term plans. For example, the President of the Association of Chinese Nationals in Mali is currently financing his daughter’s studies in sociology in Montreal, Canada. Others in Senegal have clear plans to bring their children to Mali to study in a French school there, as it is the cheapest among the international schools in the region. For all of them, the advantage of the French school is obviously the opportunities it would give to their children, such as pursuing further studies in France or Europe after obtaining their high school diploma. For Dr. Zhang such a plan is currently being realized; his daughter, who arrived in Mali in July 2006, will be entering a French school next September.

In Dakar, where the first group of Chinese tradesmen on the Avenue du Centenaire arrived at the beginning of the 2000s, very few Chinese children can be seen except few babies. Among the three or four Chinese families¹⁸

¹⁸ Notably those of businessman Li, of the boss of Henan China, and of the *China News* correspondent.

who have been living in Senegal for a long time, some had already chosen to let their children study at the French school. The daughter of the *China News* correspondent in Dakar is currently finishing a master's programme in France.

6 Conclusion

The two cases studies presented and compared allow for a better understanding of the development of Chinese small and medium sized businesses in Africa. It stresses the diversity of situation in explaining the Chinese presence, giving importance to the national context. One might believe that Dakar, as the economic hub of the sub-region, would offer better economic opportunities to the Chinese traders; however, this is not the case. The Chinese residents in Bamako are much more prosperous. This is not only due to the long-standing diplomatic and cooperation links but also the organization of the business communities. The Senegalese and Lebanese businessmen are also able to voice their discontent effectively and put pressure on local authorities.

Nevertheless we are only beginning to gain a better understanding of the small and medium sized Chinese businesses. If the diversity of social profile or some of the conflicts that structure the Chinese population has been analysed, the time of arrival should be better taken in account. In the future, it will be important to better historicize the Chinese presence even in countries like Mali and Senegal where their arrival is very recent. It is already possible to distinguish different waves of migration and a progressive diversification of that migration. This perspective should also push toward a better understanding of their success but also their failure. It is true that the Chinese businessmen's life stories tend to show the successful one or at least those who survive. However, this is not always the case.

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