

The Chinese footprint growing across Africa

By Howard W. French

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ADDIS ABABA: I had a jarring exchange after boarding a packed Ethiopian Airlines flight to Beijing recently following an extended African trip.

One of the last passengers to board, a Chinese man, stopped at my row and gestured to the empty window seat, urging me to move over, so that he could enjoy the aisle.

"Let the foreigner sit on the inside, and let the Chinese sit together," he said, in Chinese, probably not expecting his new "foreign" neighbor to understand. Startled, I replied: "We are in Ethiopia. We are all foreign here, aren't we? Besides, this is my seat."

I quickly got over his pushiness, and the two of us became friends for the rest of the flight, enjoying stories about his business dealings in Angola, and much else. More importantly, when the gust of his presumptuousness had blown over, a quick glance around the cabin showed that he had a point.

Virtually the entire plane was filled with Chinese people, a broad gamut of men and women from grizzled laborers to small investors to polished executives, and the 14-hour flight was abuzz with conversations among them, swapped stories of plantations in Ivory Coast, public works projects in Angola, mining ventures in Zambia, construction workers in Nigeria.

We were taking off from Ethiopia, aboard that country's flag carrier, but the point was made: With their customary speed and unfussiness, the Chinese have made themselves at home in Africa, and given that things are just getting started, the Chinese footprint, already impressive, is likely to grow and grow. Indeed, Chinese airlines are starting direct flights to several African destinations.

My return flight to China spurred me to search my memory for experiences flying back and forth to the United States during two periods of lengthy residence and work on the African continent. I dimly recalled a time when an American carrier, the long defunct Pan Am, flew directly to West Africa. For most of the last three decades, though, American carriers have shunned the region and the continent generally.

As I remembered them, the passengers one finds aboard the few existing flights linking the United States to Africa make for an interesting comparison with my Chinese fellow travelers. Yes, there is a smattering of business people and of tourists. But the Americans who travel to Africa tend to be aid workers of one kind or another: officials of the U.S. government and of the international financial insti-

tutions, like the World Bank, and the army of well-paid consultants and contractors that they deploy. They are also relief workers and missionaries and Peace Corps volunteers, and academics doing research.

There is much to be gleaned from the contrast here. Chinese people today look at Africa and see opportunity, promise and a fertile field upon which their energies, mercantile and otherwise, can be given full play. Too often, the West looks at Africa and sees a problematic pupil, a sickly patient, and a zone of pestilence, where failure looms in the air like a curse.

To be sure, China will not forever be the fresh-faced and idealized suitor that many in Africa take it to be today. This is clearly a special, honeymoon-like moment. But the very appeal of China owes a great deal to disillusionment in Africa with the West, whose preachiness and shifting prescriptions, whose unreliability and penchant in the face of frustration for damning cultural explanations for Africa's failures, free of critical self-examination, have left many Africans exasperated.

This exasperation has been the all but unacknowledged backdrop to a string of recent events, from the Wolfowitz scandal at the World Bank to the recent Group of 8 summit meeting, the common threads being Western posturing about helping Africa, a failure to deliver on promises and the dearth of African voices heard, or even admitted into the debate.

Speaking of the lack of transparency at the World Bank, and the failure of its projects in her country, Thérèse Mekombé, a member of a Chadian commission created to supervise the use of that country's oil revenues, was categorical in an interview, saying, "The World Bank is not a partner in development, and can never be a partner in our development."

Another recent exception was an op-ed column by the Senegalese president, Abdoulaye Wade, which was published in this newspaper, urging G-8 nations to invest in Africa "like India and China."

Implicit in his remarks is the widespread feeling that Western promises typically amount to little more than lip service and that it is Africa's new partners, led by China, that are showing the kind of decisiveness that can change the landscape.

For the most part, the "African" voice of disillusionment was left to Bono, the rock star who has made the continent his personal cause. He denounced the G-8 pledge of \$60 billion to fight AIDS, malaria and other diseases in Africa as "burobabble,"

noting that the plan consists largely of money already pledged, and falls short of United Nations targets that oblige G-8 nations to spend \$15 billion a year to combat AIDS alone through 2010.

Others, meanwhile, have noticed that aid to Africa was static last year after the supposedly historic breakthrough at Gleneagles, Scotland, in 2005, when Tony Blair wrung commitments from his G-8 peers of dramatic new assistance for Africa.

Compare this with China, whose diplomacy has been on a tear across the continent recently, writing off debt, exempting African exports from trade duties, lending increasingly huge amounts of money,

and, generally speaking, making things happen quickly and in a big way.

Surely China is pursuing its own interests. Just as surely, much of what it is attempting will not pan out, or will have deleterious effects, particularly since no distinction is made between governments that are relatively clean and representative and those that are odious.

This Chinese activism, though, like the Chinese passengers on my flight, is an appropriate mirror for the West, which gives itself great credit for caring and for principles. And on the playing field of Africa, it is not hard to see who is gaining ground.

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