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China's long march to Africa

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BBC News | 29 November 2007

By Michael Bristow

BBC News, Beijing

Chinese migrants are following in the footsteps of European settlers, by seeking their fortunes in Africa.

In the 19th century, most of those drawn to Africa - businessmen, explorers, missionaries and soldiers - came from western Europe.

Now it is the turn of the Chinese. Over the last decade, tens of thousands have moved to Africa with Beijing's approval.

They are settling all over the continent, in rural and urban areas, and are involved in agriculture, construction and trade.

This latest wave of Chinese migrants - thought to total up to 750,000 - is not the first to have travelled to Africa.

In the 1960s, China's communist leader Mao Zedong forged close links with the continent in a bid to garner political support.

But the Chinese who have moved to Africa in the last 10 years are going for economic, not political reasons as they did under Mao.

Boosting crop yields

They are part of China's bid to secure raw materials and markets for its manufactured goods, but they are also carving out their own opportunities.

The head of China's Export-Import Bank, Li Ruogu, recently suggested just how important Africa could be for ordinary Chinese people.

In a speech in Chongqing, an administrative region with a large rural population, he urged Chinese farmers to move to Africa.

"Chongqing has a relatively strong agricultural base. Africa has many countries with plenty of land, but food output that is not up to expectations," he said, according to a local media report.

"There's no harm in allowing [Chinese] farmers to leave the country to become farm owners [in Africa]," he added.

Mr Li said the bank would fully support this migration with investment, project development and help with the sale of products.

But Chinese farmers have already started moving to Africa, according to Liu Jianjun of the China-Africa Business Council, which helps Chinese firms find business opportunities in Africa.

Mr Liu has personally sent several thousand Chinese people to Africa over the last few years from his home city of Baoding in Hebei Province.

His organisation mainly focuses on setting up agricultural companies, which he calls "Baoding Villages".

These Baoding farmers are working in Kenya, Uganda, Ghana and Senegal, growing crops with African partners and then turning them into food products.

"At first, people were not willing to go to Africa because it's too hot, there are diseases and there are wars," says Mr Liu.

"But after the Chinese government called for people to go, they were more positive."

Echoing the comments of bank chief Mr Li, he says Chinese farmers use their expertise to help Africans mechanise farms to increase crop yields.

Money motive

Experts say China is not yet a major player in African agriculture, but it is changing other economic sectors.

Chris Alden, of the South African Institute of International Affairs, says the Chinese are beginning to have a big influence in retailing.

"Chinese migrants or former labourers on construction sites are opening shops, using their contacts to get cheap goods from China," he says.

As an example, he cites the provincial town of Huambo in central Angola, which had no Chinese shops seven years ago.

Five years ago there were five and now there are more than 20, says Mr Alden, who has just written a book called China in Africa.

Unsurprisingly, many Chinese migrants themselves say the chance to earn more money is the main motive for leaving their country.

Chinese worker Lu Shaoqing, who is helping to build sports stadiums in Angola, says he left his wife and seven-year-old daughter in Beijing for a number of reasons.

"I came here because I wanted to see Africa, and Angola is under reconstruction at the moment so I came to help with that," he says.

But he admits the 700-odd Chinese workers in his company have the chance to earn up to three times as much as back home in China.

Influence

Most Chinese workers, like Mr Lu, will spend just a few years in Africa before returning home to China.

Their influence on African society is reduced further because many travel without their families and live in all-Chinese communities.

Mr Lu's firm has flown over more than 20 Chinese cooks to make sure workers can enjoy their favourite meals.

But the Chinese are already changing the economic landscape in Africa as they seek to enrich not just their companies and their country, but also themselves.

And their influence is set to grow.

Mr Alden says with so many poor farmers in China unable to make a living off the land, Africa presents a host of inviting opportunities.

"There's not the sense that the streets are paved with gold but, for people who cannot find work, Africa is a realistic opportunity."

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