China’s economic ascendance over the past two decades has generated ripple effects on the world economy. Its search for natural resources to satisfy the demands of industrialization has led it to expand its global links, including with Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa. In the last two decades, there have been growing trade, investment, and aid links between China and sub-Saharan Africa. Trade between China and Africa now totals more than $100 billion with Chinese companies importing oil from Angola and Sudan, timber from Central Africa, and copper from Zambia. At the same time, Chinese investment in infrastructure is bringing capital and ideas to the continent. Overall, China has presented both an opportunity for Africa to reduce its marginalization from global capital and trade flows and a challenge for how to effectively harness the influx of new resources and ideas to promote economic development at home.

In this context of this growing Sino-African relationship, it is important to understand the micro foundations of these new macroeconomic trends. A recently published book tries to understand the relationship between the two by looking closely at Chinese migration to Africa, a growing trend whose importance has not been reflected in the research. The book called “Chinese Migrants and Africa’s Development: New Imperialists or Agents of Change” is an interesting and well-researched book on a topic of increasing global importance. As more than half a million private Chinese citizens have arrived in sub-Saharan Africa since 2001, this book is a timely and important one. Since one of the central theses of the book is that the narrative of tension and conflict around the Chinese presence in Africa is less pervasive upon examination, this is a book that should be read as it provides a very strong perspective against some of the conventional wisdom.

Overall, the book is a good read and quite original in its approach and its methodology. It is written in a style that is relatively accessible to the non-specialist and combines social science theories with anecdotal evidence. The authors jump from theory to actual events on the ground with considerable ease, and the jargon is appropriate for the work. The book is an important one. It addresses the growing Chinese migration into Africa and provides a balanced perspective of the relationship between Chinese migrants and Africans societies and economies and is a vial counterbalance to much of the existing literature, which sees the relationship between China and Africa as an exploitative and unequal relationship. Broadly speaking, the book surveys the social and cultural history of Chinese migration to Africa, explains the interplay between migrant’s micromotives and the overall global economic forces, and finds a multiplicity of rationales for migration amongst different actors. It presents a nuanced perspective of the relationships between Chinese migrants and African societies and economies, fluctuating between hostility and conviviality. It goes beyond formal state-to-state relationships and assesses individual encounters. It ends by assessing policy issues raised by the findings.

The book has a number of interesting virtues. It taps into a rich material based on a set of qualitative case studies based on close to 150 interviews with Chinese migrants in Ghana, Angola, and Nigeria who work in both state-owned enterprises as well as Chinese private companies. This work was complemented by surveys of local perceptions towards Chinese in these countries, as well as a specific study of female migrants in Nigeria and Tanzania. The book is well-researched and has a long and interesting bibliography as the authors go to great lengths to examine the existing evidence. The disaggregation of Chinese actors, situated within the larger historical context of engagements between China and Africa, is quite useful. The book is an interesting amalgamation - part history, part sociology, part journalism, part political economy.

The book’s most appealing parts are the fascinating stories. One learns of the Chinese who moved to Africa to escape some of the difficulties of Mao’s Cultural Revolution and of the workers
in SOE’s who arrived due to Deng’s liberalization and China’s outward oriented policies. There are lots of interesting anecdotes on the improvements in cross-cultural communication and the rise of friendships and the positive spillovers of the migration. The connection between the Hong Kong Chinese manufacturing elite and the Nigeria political elite is interesting. The section on the relationship between Chinese bosses and local workers is particularly illuminating. The book does a great job of weaving all the different tales of Chinese migrants in Africa to tell a story of the interplay between individual dynamics, cultural norms, and economic forces. Finally, the book provides a disaggregated perspective on migration in the context of broader political economy considerations and examines the multiplicity of forces that allow or shape migration. Throughout the book, the authors avoid conventional and monocausal explanations.

There are three areas where the book has some shortcomings. First, there are not enough numbers in the book and it relies mostly on qualitative case studies, which do convey rich material, but which lack precise quantitative data. As such, it is hard to measure magnitudes and have comparable numbers in the absence of a sufficiently large sampling frame. Sometimes one wonders if some of the anecdotes are representative of broader patterns of reflective of individual experience. The findings of the book on greater conviviality could benefit from more empirical backing. Second, the book’s focus on two or three countries perhaps ignores the heterogeneity of the Chinese migration to Africa and the range of countries and governments. Work from West, East, and Southern Africa could provide additional richness, although it is not easy to do. Finally, the book could benefit from stronger policy recommendations for both governments and enterprises to ensure that Chinese migrants in Africa create a “win-win” situation. The

Overall, the book is both entertaining and informative and an important contribution to a growing field. One hopes the authors continue on their quest to further enrich our understanding of one of the fascinating trends of the early twenty-first century.

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