

Forum

'Self-isolation' not limited to Chinese in Africa

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Chinese in Africa are often portrayed in the West as especially ethnocentric. Former US ambassador to Nigeria John Campbell has said as much. Yet, Chinese seem no more ethnocentric than, for example, Americans: studies using the Generalized Ethnocentrism Scale to compare university students in China and the US found that Chinese students were much less ethnocentric than their American counterparts.

An aspect of the claimed ethnocentrism of Chinese in Africa is their supposed preference for self-isolation. Some Chinese workers on infrastructure projects or in extractive industries do live collectively on worksites or in compounds, due to safety concerns. These arrangements however are not necessarily their choice: living in compounds may be required by larger Chinese firms. Many other Chinese companies do not have compounds. Chinese working for them often live individually or in small groups.

Indeed, studies have contrasted whites living in Fes, Morocco, who individually self-isolate themselves, with Chinese in Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of Congo, whose employers require them to live in compounds. An international affairs specialist in the US has noted that many white South Africans in Tanzania self-isolate and "are often accused of importing racism from home. This includes establishing exclusive schools, social clubs and resorting to the use of violence against Tanzanian laborers."

Although few media acknowledge that many Westerners in Africa self-isolate, a 2014 study by UK recruitment firm Robinsons has shown otherwise as to Britons.

Questioning "1,000 UK expats about their life overseas, including friendship groups," it found that almost half of those in Africa "describe their social group as mainly British." An additional percentage may have as the main members of their social groups non-British expats, not Africans. Moreover, most Britons in Africa live in ex-British colonies where many locals speak English. They thus do not have the language barrier Chinese encounter. Britons' self-isolation in Africa is furthermore not "natural." Expats who move to Britain mostly do not self-isolate: a survey taken by the UK bank HSBC found that half of expats in Britain say they have many local friends.

A US analyst's study of security for Chinese overseas, for the conservative Jamestown Foundation, has noted that employees of Western firms may be even more removed from local societies than are employees of (certain) Chinese companies.

Chinese companies usually require workers to live in special encampments where their security staff is often inexperienced, under-equipped and undermanned in order to cut costs. In contrast, many Western companies place their staff in better-financed, high-security encampments, which may remove the staff from the local community and appear segregationist, but nonetheless tends to provide greater security.

An article about an American oil company employee working in Angola has observed that "Like other oilmen he lived in a compound with grocery stores, restaurants and bars, and rarely ventured outside, and then only when it was absolutely necessary."

Though some Chinese in Africa self-isolate or have few local friends, that is also true of many Africans in China. A 2010 study of 300 Africans, mainly merchants in Guangdong, found that 30 percent of those surveyed had already lived in China for at least two years and 30 percent for at least five years. Some 42 percent had received tertiary education and another 26 percent were high school graduates. Despite these characteristics, "interviewees state[d] on average that most of their friends have the same nationality, some other African nationalities, and a few Chinese friends."

Chinese merchants in Botswana report feeling more secure living in a Chinese community due to robberies, but a Chinese working in Angola has also cited another reason that has nothing to do with "ethnocentrism." Chinese in Africa, just like migrant workers in China, may live on construction sites and not go out in order to save money.

Several factors not connected with ethnocentricity or racist segregation thus explain Chinese living arrangements in Africa. There are also worksites where Chinese and Africans live together: at Ghana's Atauabo Gas Plant construction site, Sinopec's Chinese and Ghanaian engineers, drivers and Ghana gas employees lived together during construction from 2012-14, while Ghanaian manual workers lived outside the site, some in their native villages.

All Chinese in Africa should localize as much as conditions permit. The notion of Chinese as particularly ethnocentric and needlessly self-isolating is however another of the many Western-constructed myths about the Chinese presence in Africa.

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