



## Value orientation of Chinese anthropologists conducting research in Africa

Walter Pon's parents were among the first Chinese to settle in downtown Johannesburg. Now in his seventies, he manages the family business and 'heart' of Johannesburg's first Chinatown, 'Sui Hing Hong', a big supply store which opened its doors in 1943. Photo by Rom Dittgen, submitted to IIAS Photo Contest 2014. All rights reserved.

GAO Liangmin

With more and more Chinese heading to East Africa to live and work, many of them are puzzled by Swahili appellations. For example, the Chinese are often referred to as 'Mzungu', which in Swahili means 'white' people or 'person who is lost'. The use of the term closely relates to the historical and sociocultural changes in East Africa, and is thus of interest to Chinese anthropologists, especially those engaged in ethnographic research in East Africa.

### My identity in East Africa

When I was conducting fieldwork in Tanzania, Rwanda, Kenya and Uganda, local people would always call me Mzungu, especially in rural areas. For example, when my German friend and I visited Rwanda in March 2017, a Rwandan friend said: "you are both Mzungu". My German friend quickly responded: "You are wrong. Gao is not Mzungu at all, right? Gao is from China". The Rwandan friend was astonished and stated: "You are both Mzungu and both whites!"

The Swahili word Mzungu has two meanings. First, the term refers to European whites, especially European colonizers and settlers. Second, Mzungu means people who get lost in the village. In the beginning, I thought I fell into the second category, but later I learned that locals called me Mzungu because they viewed me as white. During and after the colonial era, local people came to adopt the black and white dualism to identify outsiders' identities. Based on this historical context, some East Africans, especially in rural areas, call anyone with a skin colour different from their own, a Mzungu.

On the other hand, the historical context also dictates that Asians are as a group generally referred to as 'Indians'. In the 6th century AD and earlier, 'Indians' living in East Africa were not just from India, but also

from Pakistan and Sri Lanka. As India was a British colony before independence in 1947, many Indians came to East Africa with the colonizer during the colonial era. Because Indians proved to be good at business, local people would often call them *Dukawalla*, which in Swahili means shopkeeper. Clearly, 'the Indian' in the history of East Africa cannot represent 'the Asian'. Nowadays, Asian people living in East Africa also include Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, etc. Interestingly, the Chinese community in East Africa call local Pakistanis and Indians: the *Yin-Ba* people (印巴人, Yin: Indian, Ba: Pakistan).

We have not really been able to identify a Swahili name for specifically the Chinese who are living and working in East Africa. Although Tanzania and China forged a friendship in the 1970s, communications between the countries have always been primarily political and limited to high-level contacts; interactions on a more personal level have been scarce. Only in recent years have we noticed locals start to use the word *Mchina* to refer to the Chinese.

### Encounters in Africa: who is the Other?

Chinese-East African interactions have been growing in recent years, especially in the trade area; not just between governments, but also face-to-face on a more personal level. With these new connections many new issues are inevitably emerging, and previous narrative models cannot address these kinds of challenges. For example, even though the Chinese in Tanzania are neither Mzungu nor 'the' Asian people of East African history, Tanzanians do still frequently refer to them in this manner. This remains an example of a lack of mutual understanding, and obviously does not match with the level of economic activity between China and Africa. Simultaneously, the Chinese are also frequently considered to be neo-colonialists in Africa.<sup>1</sup> This short

essay uses the key anthropological concept of 'the Other' to explore this question further.

The concept of the Other was introduced by anthropologists who worked in the service of colonial projects. In the colonial context, some anthropologists directly served the colonists and did their research in order to satisfy the European curiosity toward the colonial world. Although Western anthropology has in the meantime already criticized the concept, it has really never satisfied Chinese anthropologists like myself who conduct research in Africa or other developing countries, because Chinese anthropology has always been based on a very different premise.

Most of the early Chinese anthropologists did their research in only China; certainly none ventured into Africa. Even now those numbers are limited. They faced much criticism by their European and Japanese colleagues. Edmund Leach, for example, claimed that endogenous research is not anthropology, since anthropologists 'should go abroad'.<sup>2</sup> However, anthropologists like Edmund Leach, originated from countries such as Great Britain, with relatively small geographical areas and biodiversity, mostly homogeneous culture and ethnicity, and a history of colonial interactions in Asia and Africa. The concept of 'the Other' came quite naturally for them.

On the other hand, Chinese anthropologists found within their own borders a huge biodiversity and geographical expanse, with no history of colonising other lands, housing a vastly heterogeneous population; in all, this gave them little impetus for foreign travel. Fei Xiaotong, a well-known Chinese anthropologist, famously put forward the concept of *Diversity in Unity* (多元一体) in China's cultural context.<sup>3</sup> Some of his peers conducting their research in Africa and other developing countries then worked with ideas of *We/Us* (我们), *Together* (在一起) and a *community of common destiny* (人类命运共同体). Clearly, the concept of the Other was not relevant for their epistemology.

### Further possibilities: from the Other to cultural sharing

I would suggest, for three reasons, that Chinese anthropologists adopt the value orientation of 'cultural sharing' (文化分享) rather than 'the Other'. First, China has never colonized any country, but some areas of China have been colonized by many western countries in the past. Chinese people can understand deeply the tremendous suffering caused by colonialism and poverty. Second, both of the concepts, *Diversity in Unity* and *community of common destiny*, are rooted in Chinese culture. These two concepts have shaped Chinese people's ways of communicating with other people. Third, anthropologists always acknowledge and value the cultural diversity and cultural relativism of communities. The idea of cultural sharing aligns well with this anthropological tradition. By adopting the idea of cultural sharing, I believe that the future of China-Africa relations will be bright, with a lot of possibilities for cooperation.

GAO Liangmin  
Department of Sociology,  
Tsinghua University, Beijing, China  
glimdix@126.com

#### Notes

- 1 See for example, French, H.F. 2014. *China's Second Continent: How a Million Migrants Are Building a New Empire in Africa*. New York: Knopf; Juan, P.C. & Heriberto, A. 2013. *China's Silent Army: The Pioneers, Traders, Fixers, and Workers Who Are Remaking the World in Beijing's Image*. London: Allen Lane.
- 2 Leach, E. 1982. *Social Anthropology*. London: Fontana Press.
- 3 Fei Xiaotong. 1993. *East Asian Social Studies - Human Studies in China*. Beijing: Peking University Press (费孝通: "东亚社会研究 - 人的研究在中国", "北京大学出版社", 1993年。)