# Chinese Traders in Ghana: The Liminality Trap, and Challenges for Ethnic Formation and Integration

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## INTRODUCTION: THE CHINESE PARADOX IN AFRICA

When discussing the new presence on the African continent of Chinese nationals who have arrived since the early 2000s, the many clusters of Chinese entrepreneurs across Africa present a paradox. In most cases, the Chinese in Africa today do not fit the characteristics typically ascribed to ethnic Chinese groups outside China. Their lack of ethnic or national solidarity and social cohesion, culminating in the widespread absence of community (compare Dobler 2009; Haugen and Carling 2005; Lam 2015a), defies conventional wisdom about overseas Chinese. The Chinese in Ghana, who have arrived as individual entrepreneurs and in substantial numbers since the turn of the millennium, are no exception in this general picture found across the African continent. They form a highly concentrated trading cluster in Accra, the country's capital and economic center. Chinese economic activities in trade have concentrated at the periphery of Makola Market, which has served as the main site of commerce. Though this pattern of spatial clustering has made the Chinese and Chinese commercial activities

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highly visible, most Chinese are dispersed across middle-class residential areas of Accra and neighboring Tema, and their isolation both from each other and from the local population presents challenges for ethnic formation and integration.

First impressions suggest that the Chinese cluster in the Ghanaian capital is temporary and transient, completely lacking in any visible expression of Chinese identity apart from the corporeal. Shops and residences appear to be improvised, bare of any decoration, sparsely furnished, and without any comfort or individual character—spaces strictly reduced to their core functions. The absence rather than the presence of common signifiers of "Chineseness" are characteristic of the Chinese trading cluster. None of the trading enterprises has Chinese characters in its name or on its shop front. Many are not even recognizable as Chinese or East Asian from their names, if they display one. Nor are there altars worshiping ancestors or folk religious deities of happiness, wealth and longevity traditionally regarded as essential for business success. The Chinese entrepreneurs seem to show no real interest in permanent resettlement, or in identifying with other Chinese or being recognized by others as Chinese. How can we explain this lack of visible Chinese identity and community? What factors cause this strong sense of temporariness and transience?

I first offer a brief overview of the history of Chinese migration to Ghana and a theoretical discussion of key concepts in liminality theory.[1] I then present empirical findings about the current Chinese presence in Ghana and address my main research questions. First, however, I must explain the basis of my data. Conflating and homogenizing "the" Chinese is a pointless though widespread exercise, so my conclusions about a non-representative sample of Chinese nationals engaged exclusively in trade do not necessarily apply to other groups of Chinese in Ghana—that is, contract workers and investors in industrial production, mining or agriculture. I gathered my information from around 120 Chinese informants through participant observation and intensive qualitative interviewing between early 2011 and late 2013.[2] The informants had been residing in Ghana for as little as two months and as long as ten years. The surveyed population of Chinese traders specializing in cheap fashion and household goods is concentrated in Accra and forms an ethnoeconomic cluster of some 200 enterprises consisting of around 1000–1500 Chinese migrants (both shareholders and employees).

## Chinese Migration to Ghana

### The Early Years: Manufacturers from Hong Kong, and Trading Representatives from Taiwan and Mainland China

Research on the Chinese in Ghana is scant. The few scholars who have done it agree that the first Chinese entered the Gold Coast region shortly before the British colony became independent in 1957. Drawing on interviews with long-term Chinese residents, Ho (2008, 2012) and Lam (2015a, b) report that the embryonic Chinese presence in Accra in the late 1950s was dominated by Hong Kong industrial investors (many of Shanghai origin) and their staff, thus also from a British colony. Partly as a result of restrictions imposed by the UK and the USA on textile imports from Hong Kong, manufacturers there are said to have arrived in Ghana to seek alternative markets (Lam 2017: 34). Soon Ghana was promoted among Hong Kong manufacturers as a suitable base. Investments were made in the manufacture of enamelware, textiles, tobacco and steel products, among other things (Lam 2015b: 33). During a period of political turmoil in Ghana in the 1970s and the early 1980s, most of the Hong Kong-run factories closed down and their investors, technicians and managers left, save for a small number who stayed with their families and opened restaurants and other businesses (Lam 2015b: 35). Many of the staff in the few remaining factories returned to Hong Kong and were replaced by cheaper labor from mainland China, particularly after the late 1980s (Lam 2015b). Some Taiwanese enterprises also entered the Ghanaian market, first as importers, and later as manufacturers and service providers. So did a small number of Chinese state-owned trading companies. Though statistics are not available, the Chinese presence seems to have been numerically insignificant. The first stage was characterized by long-term investment in basic manufacturing and the settlement of mostly Cantonese-speaking investors, managers and staff, but in the 1970s and 1980s the movements of trading representatives belonging to private Taiwan companies and mainland Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) were more transitory. No more than a dozen or so of these early Chinese migrants remained in Ghana. Informants still present in Ghana during the period of my research agreed that, by the 1990s, migratory movements of Hong Kong and Taiwan entrepreneurs and staff had ceased, and Chinese state-owned trading offices were closed or had moved into private hands in the course of economic reforms and privatization within the People's Republic of China.

## *The Age of Trade Liberalization: Trading Entrepreneurs from Mainland China*

The foundations of the current Chinese presence in Ghana, which is dominated by independent traders, were not laid until the late 1990s. A limited number of Chinese state-owned trading offices had been active in Ghana since the late 1980s, but they ceased operations one by one in the second half of the 1990s in a phase of major restructuring and privatization in China (Tang, May 2, 2011; Tang, December 11, 2011). Confronted with the choice of unemployment in China or entrepreneurship in Ghana, some of these trade representatives became the Chinese pioneers of private Sino-Ghanaian trade. These formerly state-employed entrepreneurs continue to occupy influential positions, but the present Chinese trading cluster has been shaped by the large wave of entrepreneurial migrants from China arriving since the turn of the millennium. Chinese SOEs are generally absent, except for a very few involved in large-scale infrastructural projects.

There is little reliable information about the number of Chinese in Ghana. Estimates vary and are largely based on interviewees' subjective impressions or vague statements by officials rather than on surveys or official counts. The figure that was widely accepted for the late 2000s was 10,000 (cf. Ho 2008: 59f; Sautman and Yan 2007), while Lam (2015b: 37) quotes the Chinese embassy's estimate of 20,000 in 2010, based on data provided by the Ghanaian Immigration Department.[3] These figures usually include a substantial number of Chinese employees working on temporary contracts as managers, technicians, engineers or construction workers in one of the large-scale projects that Chinese SOEs are carrying out across the country.

Informants from all groups (the few remaining Hong Kong migrants, a handful of later Taiwan investors and the large majority of newly arrived mainland traders, as well the people interviewed by Ho [2008, 2012] and Lam [2015b]), generally agree that there is little interaction between the few remaining Hong Kong migrants and Taiwan traders scattered across Accra, the larger numbers of temporary construction workers, technicians and managers of infrastructure projects in remote areas, and the large numbers of new Chinese entrepreneurial migrants who have created a highly visible economic cluster in the central business district of the city. Most new Chinese entrepreneurial migrants have chosen to import cheap consumer goods made in China, so trade is the dominant economic activity of the Chinese in Ghana today.

### Regulatory Framework and Business Environment in Trade

All foreigners investing in trade are barred from the "sale of anything what-soever in a market, petty trading, hawking or selling from a kiosk at any place" by the Ghana Investment Act (1994), which reserves these economic activities for Ghanaians. This stipulation is usually interpreted as banning foreigners from engaging in retail selling. Chinese merchants today therefore limit their activities to import and wholesale, or at least they present their practices as such. When we began researching, the Ghana Companies Code (1963) required foreign-invested wholesale companies to prove an investment of at least USD300,000 (deposited in a local bank account or in commodities of equivalent value) and, in theory, to create jobs for at least ten Ghanaians. The investment floor was later raised to USD1 million. Once the foreign investor has fulfilled these minimum legal requirements, the company is entitled to two working visas (more if the registered investment is higher). As a rule of thumb, Chinese entrepreneurs who intended to set up a wholesale business in Ghana during the period of our research needed between USD0.5 million and USD1 million as initial capital. In addition to the legal requirements, shop and warehouse spaces had to be rented for five to ten years at a rent of USD25,000–USD60,000 each, payable in advance (Gan, February 17, 2011; Lian, December 20, 2011; Luo, February 4, 2011; Shen, February 4, 2011). Housing, a car, maybe a van or truck for delivering goods and—last but not least—commodities accounted for the rest.

A comparison of the number of Chinese trading firms clearly visible in the central market area of Accra in early 2011 with the total of 147 such businesses accounted for in Ghanaian official statistics in the period 1994–2010 (GIPC 2011) suggests that Chinese entrepreneurs are reluctant to comply with the requirement to register with the Ghana Investment Promotion Centre and that the official records are not to be trusted. The unreliability of the data reflects a general problem regarding estimates of the number of Chinese in Ghana.

### The Chinese Trade Cluster of Accra: Matured but Not Institutionalized

Chinese entrepreneurs trying their luck in Ghana initially came from a range of places in China, including the northeast. However, the financial crisis of 2007/2008 was a turning point. Thus, by the time of my research, Zhejiangese (and, to a lesser extent, Fujianese) had largely outcompeted and replaced their fellow Chinese from other regions. Those who survived

the competition included former employees of state-owned Chinese trading companies, who had not only turned into successful independent traders but successfully diversified and expanded the scope of their economic activities. Most of these pioneers have started up in the service sector, invested in industrial production or teamed up with SOEs active mainly in the building and telecommunications sectors (Gu 2011; Lam 2015a). Several Chinese restaurants operated by northeasterners, Zhejiangese and Cantonese cater mostly to the Ghanaian middle class, whereas three Chinese supermarkets offer Chinese vegetables produced locally by Chinese farmers, a small range of soybean-based products such as tofu and soybean milk made by local Chinese, and fruit freshly imported from China.

Services provided by the Chinese cluster in Accra generally seem to be diversified and mature. However, the supermarkets do not serve as community centers or network nodes because the Chinese traders, who still dominate the community numerically, avoid buying there. Instead they import their own (dry) foodstuffs in the containers they receive every other week. Many even replenish their supplies of garlic, ginger and leeks in this way. Others grow vegetables in their backyards (Hong, February 15, 2011; Lu, December 7, 2011; Shen, December 10, 2011). It is small wonder that the first of the three Chinese supermarkets that opened was established by one of the pioneering private investors to comply with repeated requests by the Chinese embassy, which regarded the existence of such a business as essential, at least symbolically (Cao, January 30, 2011; Fang, December 8, 2011; Tang, January 27, 2011).

Attempts to build and institutionalize a community by incorporating all or most of the Chinese entrepreneurs into a Chinese (business) association largely failed. Only a small group of private businessmen (not primarily active in trade) was enlisted by the Chinese embassy to form the core of a pan-Chinese association officially registered as the Ghana Chinese Chamber of Commerce (*Jiana Zhonghua Gongshang Zonghui*) in 1994. This association has represented the interests of Chinese entrepreneurs who arrived comparatively early and were able to diversify their portfolios from trade to services and industrial production. The recruitment of members among the numerically dominating traders, however, has remained half-hearted and sluggish, and traders said in interviews that their interests were not represented by the association. Many regarded it as an exclusive club of those bigger private investors and representatives of SOEs able to benefit from close relations with both the Chinese embassy and local Ghanaian authorities, while their own business success did not depend on such political ties (Dai, February 9, 2011; Hong, December 10, 2011; Lu, January 30, 2011; Shen,

December 13, 2011). Thus they have generally been reluctant to join activities promoted by the Chinese embassy or this association and instead prefer to keep their distance from Chinese official institutions. By the end of my data-collection period the Ghana Chinese Chamber of Commerce served as an exclusive class-based club of Chinese investors lobbying both Chinese and Ghanaian state institutions for their own narrow business interests without providing any community service to the wider group of Chinese nationals (Fang, February 5, 2011; Hong, January 30, 2011; Shen, December 19, 2011; Tang, December 19, 2011). The traders have not yet tried to build up social institutions among themselves. Although Chinese trading businesses have clustered almost exclusively within a small area on the periphery of Makola Market in central Accra, social isolation has been the rule. The traders regard each other as competitors instead of coethnic collaborators, and they do not visit each other's shops, unless they trade in different goods or were on good terms with each other prior to migrating. This isolation is accentuated by the pattern of their housing, which is widely dispersed across middle-class neighborhoods of Accra and nearby Tema.

## MIGRATION, RITUAL PASSAGE AND LIMINALITY: SOME THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In struggling to conceptualize the new Chinese entrepreneurs in Africa in terms of migration, diaspora, transnationalism, translocality or sojourning, the concept of liminality has been a strong inspiration. The nonconformist anthropologist Arnold van Gennep (1909) was convinced that the *rites de passage* that every individual in all forms of society undergoes when entering a new life phase (adolescence, adulthood, apprenticeship, marriage, pregnancy, etc.) follow the same tripartite sequence, beginning with separation (*rites de séparation*), leading into a phase of transition (*rites de marge*) and ending in reintegration (*rites d'aggregation*). He emphasized the spatial character of this sequential process.

Almost completely ignored and forgotten by the scientific community for half a century, Van Gennep's work was rediscovered by the anthropologist Victor Turner when *Rites de Passage* was first published in English in 1960. Turner was most interested in the second, liminal phase of the *rites de passage*, in which those who have parted from society are "neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention" (1969: 80f). In this transitional phase, individuals

do not belong to the society that they were previously part of and they are not yet reincorporated into it. For Turner, liminality is a limbo, a phase or space characterized by seclusion, tests and hardships, ambiguity and possibilities, uncertainty, the absence of structure and the experience of community (*communitas*). This latter aspect of unstructured *communitas* has drawn much criticism. Referring to pilgrimage in Turner's work, Eade and Swallow (1991) argue that unlike the imagined *communitas*, liminality is far from unstructured and may even accentuate prior distinctions between individuals as much as it dissolves differences.

One primary characteristic of liminality (as defined by Van Gennep and Turner) is that there is a way into it as well as a way out (Thomassen 2009: 21). In ritual passages, "members of the society are themselves aware of the liminal state: they know that they will leave it sooner or later" (21). But Turner suggested that "a liminal state may become 'fixed', referring to a situation in which the suspended character of social life takes on a more permanent character" (Thomassen 2009: 15). This idea of permanent liminality has been elaborated extensively by the sociologist Arpad Szakolczai. Within the context of ritual passages, a key feature of liminality is the final stage of reintegration, in which the initiand is recognized as a part of the social order and welcomed into that order with a new role, "stamped by the formative experience" (Thomassen 2009: 22). Without this reintegration process, liminality becomes permanent and can also become very dangerous. Szakolczai acknowledges that "liminality becomes a permanent condition when any of the three phases in this sequence becomes frozen, as if a film stopped at a particular frame" (2000: 220).

A number of researchers have taken the concept of liminality beyond tribal rites of passage or Christian pilgrimage and applied it to secular contexts and contemporary situations, such as traveling, studying abroad and labor migration. In these secular contexts of spatial mobility, quite a few authors also found indicators that liminal entities can be permanently caught in the in-between space. Various minority groups can be considered liminal. Thomassen (2009: 19) argues that undocumented immigrants (present but not "official") and stateless people can be regarded as liminal because they are "betwixt and between home and host, part of society, but sometimes never fully integrated.". In migration studies, this is applied mainly to migrant workers, refugees, asylum seekers and "illegal" or undocumented migrants: "for some migrants the passage is never complete … these migrants remain trapped in a liminal phase, as unincorporated outsiders" (Hastings and Wilson 1999: 10).

If we remember the brief initial impressions of temporariness and transience of the Chinese trading cluster in Accra, the traders can also be seen, ultimately, as torn between two (or more) places or trapped in a state "which is betwixt-and-between the normal, day-to-day cultural and social states and processes of getting and spending, preserving law and order and registering structural status" (Turner 1977: 465). What happened to cause the entrepreneurial sojourns of these Chinese traders to end up in this frozen liminality? Is liminality the clue to understanding the lack of ethnic identifications, institutionalization and community-building among the Chinese trading migrants in Ghana?

## CHINESE TRADERS IN ACCRA: ENTREPRENEURIAL SOJOURNING AS RITUAL JOURNEY

From the individual Chinese trader's perspective, the endeavor to leave China in order to become entrepreneurially active in an unknown place somewhere in Africa can be seen as a *rite de passage* and a ritual journey. First the trader wants to make money from international trade. After a period of overseas entrepreneurship, they return home. The stages of economic sojourning in Africa resemble a ritual journey that eventuates in the integration of a markedly transformed person, the successful international trader, into Chinese society or the African host country.

### *Separation: Entrepreneurs Embarking on a Ritual Journey*

The ritual journey of the Chinese entrepreneur starts with their separation from family, peers and community in China. Family members are left behind either to spare them the strains and stresses of the ritual journey (in the case of small children) or because they are not qualified for this transformative experience (unproductive spouses whose company would only reduce the expected profit) (Cao, December 10, 2011; Hong, February 10, 2011; Li, December 16, 2011). Physical separation and spatial as well as emotional distance are part of the ritual journey. Language, culture, customs, rules, laws and practices that structure the quotidian and provide the individual with security and predictability within one sociocultural context are exchanged for the unknown. Regardless of their individual backgrounds before migration, most Chinese traders in Accra thought their new host city would be a temporary space of possibilities and ambiguities, and still insisted

on this interpretation of liminality when they were interviewed about their actual experiences. There were only minor variations between those who had earlier been traders in China and those who became traders only after reaching Ghana. The official Chinese government rhetoric regarding the "Going Out" policy and China's South–South partnership with Africa, though both not addressed to petty entrepreneurs, may have had some impact on their decision to go to Ghana. Together with the general emphasis on entrepreneurship in China and the country's emigration fever, this can be seen to have further strengthened the idea of embarking on a ritual journey that involves physical mobility, spatial displacement, hardship and sacrifice.

## The Nature of Liminality: Trials and Hardships

A recurring theme in the interviews with Chinese traders was the narrative of eating bitterness. Traders regard living standards as much lower than in China, at both the personal and the societal level. They see power cuts, cuts in the water supply, the absence of modern public transport, dysfunctional political institutions, the poor health of the local population, and the omnipresent threat of contracting malaria and other infectious diseases as symptomatic of general underdevelopment. All this has to be endured for the greater good. Most traders see their life in an African city as a period of trial and testing, a mental and physical challenge that had to be met in this liminal phase of transition that would ultimately bring them financial profits, enhanced wellbeing and improved status. Also suggestive of the liminal phase of a ritual journey is the repetitive routine that informants call the "challenge of the deadly dullness of everyday life" as transient Chinese in an African city.

Chinese traders in Accra experience little change from day to day and over the weeks, months and years. They start at 6.00 am, have a brief breakfast and drive to their shops, where they stay until 5.00 pm, selling goods by the carton, interrupted only by internet chat during slack periods and collecting debts from African customers at Makola Market. Fish, meat, vegetables and fruit are delivered to the shop front by itinerant vendors, so exploring the neighborhood for purchases is not necessary (and is seen as unsafe). Visiting nearby Chinese shops is regarded as inappropriate or even taboo because of the fierce competition. After driving home, a simple dinner is cooked, together with lunch for the following day. Washing and personal hygiene are followed by internet chat, gaming and watching Chinese

movies, if the electricity is on. Sundays are free and usually spent mostly in bed, together with housekeeping, cooking, eating and internet surfing, or a trip to Accra Mall and a visit to the supermarket and a fast-food venue. In most cases not even important traditional Chinese festivals or National Day interrupt these daily routines and weekly rhythms.

### Transforming Personalities: Alienation through Adaption

All the informants were prepared to stay in Ghana for "as long as profits are sufficient", but none considered making Accra their permanent home. They had entered an alien space but only temporarily, and it was one in which many of their social and communicative skills became dysfunctional. Although many had adjusted to local business practices, and learned words and rudimentary phrases in local languages for strictly functional conversation in the course of their transformation within this liminal phase, in effect they never really arrived. Irrespective of the length of their stay, personal backgrounds, financial means or previous status, they had sought to maintain close links with their peers back home and around the world by means of electronic communication and the consumption of electronic cultural products. Skype, QQ, WeChat and Chinese video portals connected them with what they had left behind in China. Not surprisingly, however, their personal connections with the homeland had thinned over time, and they had lost track of the continuing rapid change in China. Some even thought their knowledge of China had become dated.

Most interviewees agreed that they had started to become alienated from China. In Africa they began to lose their Chinese identity or even saw it (or at least displaying it) as detrimental to economic success. African customers knew nothing about any of China's brands of good reputation in the Chinese domestic market. They rather associated Chinese names and the Chinese language with an inferior quality of goods made in China. In this context it was not a good idea to advertise one's commodities by displaying signifiers of Chinese identity. A few of my informants even used Italian-sounding brand names in order to increase the marketability of their shoes made in Zhejiang. Uncertainty and vulnerability (as outsiders within a highly religious society, of Pentecostal Christianity influenced by animistic cults) have also had an impact. Chinese folk religious practices, such as burning paper money in front of the shop and raising a small altar to the God of Wealth, which are commonplace in China, are absent from Chinese stores in Accra. Even the Fortune Cat, imported to China from Japan, is

missing. Traders explain that these folk religious practices or superstitions have either lost their meaning or have been abandoned to avoid suspicion in the host society. Ironically, though, Ghanaians are more likely to suspect Chinese traders because of their apparent lack of any religious belief.

Clear markers of Chinese identity are often avoided so as not to antagonize local groups or jeopardize business success, or simply because some customs have lost their meaning in the African environment. At Chinese New Year, the absence from Accra of visible signs of this important festival surprised me. None of my informants attached Spring Festival couplets to their shop doors. Without the presence of an extended family, New Year's Eve was either ignored or reduced to a slightly more opulent dinner. On the first day of New Year, everybody was back in the shop. The same happened during the Mid-Autumn Festival and on Chinese National Day. Informants usually explained that these holidays and customs had lost all meaning in Accra.

With regard to business, all my informants had adapted to Ghanaian society more or less consciously. Business practices, both individual and collective, had changed either on arrival or gradually over time. Commodity loans, for instance, are an integral part of trade in Ghana. Most Chinese informants said they would never accept this practice. In time, however, all of them grudgingly admitted that they regularly granted commodity loans and even had to tolerate a large proportion of bad loans if they wanted to stay in business. Offering free storage of sold goods for undefined periods of time; tolerating physical encroachments on one's private space by customers, collaborators or local neighbors; enduring insubordinate behavior on the part of local employees; and the frequent tipping of employees for routine tasks—all are accommodations that the Chinese traders had quickly learned, even though they violated their value system (Giese 2016; Giese and Thiel 2015a).

## *Liminality Without* Communitas

Included among the traders were people who had previously engaged in commerce, owned a supermarket or a restaurant in China, worked as a sales assistant, a construction or factory worker, an ambulance driver or a hostess, or studied business administration in Germany. However, all Chinese traders were stripped of their previous experience, rank and status in the course of their ritual journey to Ghana. They had all started out in Africa by adjusting to local expectations. Individual trajectories do not matter much

in the African context, even less so in regard to the immigrants' hosts. Local people are quick to deny these ethnic and cultural outsiders any individuality. "The Chinese" are usually perceived as a uniform group, and stereotypes are the rule. They are collectively portrayed as unwelcome competitors, suppliers of cheap and shoddy goods, greedy profiteers void of social responsibility, exploitative employers and antisocial individuals without morality rooted in religion. They are suspected of illegal residence, fraud, tax evasion and the like. And "they are all the same."

Being all in the same boat and on the same ritual journey, these Chinese entrepreneurs might have been expected to experience Turner's *communitas*. Structurally, they share the same fate as Chinese outsiders in African markets, and they perceive themselves as vulnerable (cf. Giese and Thiel 2014). Large numbers are from the same place (Zhejiang or Fujian), which in the past might have ensured ethnic solidarity and community. However, they have failed to experience *communitas*. It is important to ask why.

First, their shared identity as traders in the same market and dealing with the same range of goods makes them competitors instead of collaborators. Local markets have long been saturated, and turned from sellers' into buyers' markets. With everyone pursuing the same strategy of "high turnover at marginal profit rates" (*bo li duo xiao*), which economists see as suitable for driving competitors out of the market but not for sustaining one's own business, they engage in ruinous competition among themselves. Local observers often ask why the Chinese are incapable of ethnic solidarity and collective bargaining at the expense of their non-Chinese competitors. Their individualization isolates them from each other rather than creating grounds for (ethnic) community.

Second, the embeddedness of some Chinese groups (notably families from Zhejiang and Fujian) in transnational kinship networks is not conducive to establishing *communitas* on the basis of ethnic solidarity. Being a member of a transnational network based on kinship or virtual kinship[4] means that Chinese migrants from Zhejiang and Fujian "can move over large geographical distances within one community" (Christiansen 2013: 149).[5] Quite a few Chinese informants have moved between locations in different countries in which members of the same family network run businesses. Moving from one network node to another without ever leaving the transnational community of kin, they do not need a localized community of fellow Chinese.

Third, Chinese traders themselves believe that they are economic sojourners and that this explains their reluctance to engage in community-building: "People come for a couple of years in order to make quick profits. Why should we stay in a place where we have to eat so much bitterness? Then why should anyone of us be interested in local community [building] when there is so much fluctuation?" This was said by an informant who had been living in Accra for more than a decade—others made the same point. How long will they stay in Ghana? Most said that this would depend on profitability, and that they were always ready to leave. Most envisaged staying "a few years" and rejected the idea of permanent settlement. But, as a matter of fact, fluctuation was far less than suggested by these interviewees, and most of those who suggested they were about to leave Ghana soon at the beginning of research were still firmly in place at the end of data collection and beyond.

Fourth, differences in status and power hinder rather than help community-building. Critics of Turner's theory have convincingly opposed his idea that interpersonal relationships in liminality are unstructured and lack differentiation by rank or status. In the case of Chinese traders in the liminal space of African cities, there is also ample evidence that differences in status and power play a crucial role. Although all these Chinese entrepreneurial sojourners meet the same tests and hardships, they are not equally prepared for dealing with them and lack equal access to the means for coping with them. In the same way as tribal initiands entering the liminal phase of a *rite de passage* differ in physical strength, cunning or hunting skills, Chinese traders are unequally equipped in terms of financial means, general business skills, readiness to assume a risk, flexibility and adaptability. Not all Chinese traders present in Accra have joined the ritual journey at the same time, and the early comers can profit from their greater experience. Individual power struggles explain much of the general lack of trust and failure to build community.

Fifth, the recent socioeconomic history of rapid change and individualization in China has left its mark on Chinese entrepreneurial migrants in Ghana and beyond. On the plus side, these entrepreneurs no longer have to maintain interpersonal relationships in order to get access to goods and to secure export licenses, as in the 1990s. The expansion of the private sector and trade liberalization in China has in principle made international trade accessible to any Chinese with the ability to raise the necessary capital. Quite a few Chinese traders in Accra simply rely on the market, sourcing their merchandise from suppliers in China without bothering too much about

cultivating personal relationships and moral obligations. Most of the interviewees have neoliberal and Social Darwinist attitudes of the sort that have dominated China's socioeconomic development since the 1990s at least. These attitudes also hinder the development of *communitas*. However, this is certainly neither specifically Chinese nor limited to Chinese groups in Africa.

## IN THE LIMINALITY TRAP: NEITHER REINTEGRATION IN CHINA NOR INTEGRATION IN GHANA

### *The Point of No Return: Chinese Ways Unlearned*

It is therefore not surprising that few Chinese traders maintain close interpersonal relationships. Even within the small groups of two to four persons that run the businesses (either collectively as shareholders or as owners and employees), the relationships often lack emotional attachment. Forced to work and live under the same roof for long periods of time with little privacy or freedom from social control and largely without alternative personal relationships, many avoid each other whenever possible. Interpersonal relationships become superficial. Quite a few informants, especially the older ones, said that keeping social relationships with fellow Chinese to a minimum freed them from the social obligations known as renqing—the exchange of favours as core element of cultivating and maintaining social networks within Chinese society. However, they find that their communicative and interpersonal skills deteriorate as a result. Because they maintain old ties at home solely by electronic means, they see themselves as less and less compatible with the social fabric in China. Efforts to stay abreast of developments at home become ever less meaningful. Quite a few interviewees feared they were "unlearning their Chinese ways" and losing their vital connection to China and their own culture.

As I mentioned earlier, signifiers of "Chineseness" and cultural, national and religious symbols are abandoned in the absence of ethnic solidarity and community. Given Ghanaian prejudice against Chinese and goods made in China, some traders see any public display of their nationality and ethnicity as detrimental. The importation from China of African wax, regarded as part of Ghana's national cultural heritage, has been particularly controversial. While there is huge demand for cheaper Chinese-made alternatives to established cloth brands, imports from China, particularly by Chinese traders, are seen as illegitimate. Although African wax ceased to be

produced in Ghana before imports from China started, and although Chinese cloth imports compete mainly with expensive Dutch brands, Chinese selling African wax feel obliged to operate secretly and underground. Other Chinese imports are less disputed, but the widespread perception that these goods are shoddy and that their import is harming local manufacturers has led most Chinese traders to play down their goods' origins. This also helps explain the suppression of visible signs of Chinese identity.

This renunciation of Chinese identity, the long absence from China, the much slower pace of life in Ghana, the lack of a Chinese social life and the simplicity of economic interactions has made the traders feeling too weak to fight off the fierce competition that they regard as the core characteristic of the domestic economy in China. As the prospect of completing their ritual journey by reintegrating into their society of origin fades the longer they live abroad, these Chinese traders tend to postpone their return indefinitely.

### Rejecting the Second Option: Integration in Africa

Ritual journeys are not completed only by reintegrating into the society of origin—other options are available. In the case of Chinese migrants in Ghana, local integration might be one such option. However, most Chinese informants, in Ghana and Africa as a whole, reject it. Lower living standards as compared with China and general reservations against the African continent as a destination for resettlement are part of the general narrative, but there are other important factors, too. Though many informants were content to entertain only shallow social relationships with other Chinese, social isolation both from the Chinese and from the host society was one of the main reasons for not integrating and taking permanent residence in Africa. Despite their growing distance from China, they insisted that China must remain their point of reference. Most remained convinced that their sojourn would be of limited duration, even if they had already spent many years in Africa. It comes as no surprise that stubbornly adhering to the idea of a (postponed) return is one side of the coin, while rejecting integration into African society is the other.

With few exceptions, Chinese traders adapt and acculturate only enough to achieve the economic goals they envisage as the outcome of their ritual journey through liminality in Africa. They have learned the social skills necessary for ritual interpersonal interaction and adapted business strategies that might qualify them to survive, but most have remained cultural illiterates. Hardly any have seriously attempted to learn English, let alone the

local languages. Key terms and rudimentary phrases in English or local languages are memorized by attaching them to similar Chinese syllables. The calculator remains the key means of communication. None of my informants has ever tried to master whole sentences or complex conversations. A personal investment of that kind is regarded as unproductive because it does not generate immediate returns and would only help if long-term integration into local African society was the aim. "Local knowledge" is accumulated only insofar as it is immediately useful for business. Only one of my informants (numbering more than 120) bothered to read a local English-language newspaper to learn about social, economic and political developments in Ghana. The others were only interested in hearing about specific administrative measures or general political tendencies that might harm their interests. They did not seek serious information but instead engaged in speculation and in spreading rumors that promoted all sorts of reservations and suspicions about Ghana and its inhabitants.

The traders adjust as little as possible to their Ghanaian environment. This goes even for daily necessities such as food. Instead, they import spices, rice, noodles, and even garlic, ginger and leeks, along with their general merchandise. They cultivate vegetables in the backyard of their houses and buy from the two or three Chinese farmers who engage in market-gardening near Accra to serve their fellow Chinese.

Food, often seen as bridging the different cultural backgrounds of migrants and hosts, in this case separates them. Although members of the Ghanaian middle class frequent Chinese restaurants in Accra, most Ghanaians reject Chinese food. In a country where locals boil water for at least three minutes before it is considered safe to drink, the short time needed for Chinese panfrying is seen as dangerous. Fried rice and one or two additional dishes prepared by Ghanaian cooks seem to be the only acceptable options in Chinese restaurants. Similarly, Chinese traders reject Ghanaian food because the ingredients are overcooked. These differing ideas about food result in cultural and social rejection, both individual and collective.

### Denial of Access: Ghana Is No Immigration Country for Chinese

Just as Chinese traders are not interested in integration, so too the idea that they might eventually join Ghanaian society is widely rejected by Ghanaians. Anti-Chinese sentiment has been mobilized for political purposes. Small-scale market traders, for instance, are regularly mobilized by political

opposition parties, which play on their fears of being outcompeted by the Chinese. Protectionist calls have always been popular. Laws and regulations barring foreign nationals from retail trade and erecting high investment thresholds for wholesale activities are evidence of these political struggles. Chinese traders are regularly accused of unfair competition, dumping inferior goods on the Ghanaian market and exploiting local workers.

Not surprisingly, Ghana shows little interest in integrating the Chinese into a society characterized by high levels of unemployment, social inequality and ethnic tensions. This is especially so because Chinese traders are said to reap huge profits from selling to Ghanaians while at the same time contributing little to Ghanaian national development or the material wellbeing of local employees and business partners. Colonial legacies, postcolonial political agendas and the longstanding presence of international intergovernmental and non-governmental organization-financed aid projects mean that there is a general expectation in Ghana that non-African foreigners should contribute to national development, local economic progress and wellbeing. Chinese SOEs have started to look at the potentially beneficial effects of isolated catchpenny acts of corporate social responsibility. To counteract the idea that all Chinese companies have ties to corrupt politicians plundering the country, the Chinese telecommunications company Huawei has resorted to occasional "donating." Company staff have distributed sweets or stationery to children in hospitals, orphanages or schools. The company buys these gifts cheaply from Ghanaian merchants in the local market.

Very few of the Chinese traders I interviewed knew much about the expectations of the host population, and none showed any interest in redistribution. The market is increasingly saturated, there are legal obligations to employ more local staff than necessary for what are essentially simple operations, rents are high, there is a serious risk of being robbed, and profits are no more than 5–10 %, so the traders have little incentive to engage in local redistribution. Their economic and migratory strategies are aimed at short-term gain, and their behavior does not promote their acceptance as immigrants. Since 1978 China has witnessed a transition from a socialist economy to extreme marketization in all spheres, so it is hard for the traders to understand why their Ghanaian employees should expect anything other than regular wages (Giese 2013). Some traders have given their employees items such as Chinese smartphones to reward good performance, but they hardly understand how to behave as responsible employers in a local context where employees expect regular and highly symbolic gifts of rice, flour and so on in addition to their wages

(Giese and Thiel 2015b). Even when the traders pay average or above-average wages and add small tips several times a day, they lack authority in the eyes of their Ghanaian workers. The idea of local integration, should the traders ever opt for it, is rejected by the host population on the grounds of the traders' moral failure, and the stereotype of the greedy Chinese.

Even so, now that the passage back to China is blocked for many traders, some have turned to alternative destinations in neighboring African countries. However, whether these migrations will eventually lead to the ritual journey's end is a moot point.

### *No Way Out of Liminality without Proper Achievement*

Many of the ritual journeys of Chinese traders have been extended year after year. Apart from the problem of coping with reintegration into China, the traders' rejection of integration into African city life and the host society's unwillingness to accept them as immigrants, another reason to prolong the liminality is the trader's actual or perceived lack of economic success and of savings that might translate into status back home. The decision to return is not easy. Profits are generally heavily reinvested into new commodities in an attempt to gradually expand the scope of the business, but many items end as shelf-warmers. Preparations for leaving normally last at least a year, and losses are almost unavoidable. In order to keep the business running, existing stock has to be continuously complemented with new items, gradually reducing the volumes of new supplies. In this way, traders wishing to exit hope to continue attracting customers and get rid of larger shares of shelf-warmers alongside new items. This is the only way to reduce stock and potential losses since few other traders would want to buy the stock of someone leaving. Even the scarcity of suitable shop spaces usually does not motivate newcomers to pay for shelf-warmers in exchange for transferring long-term tenancy of shop and warehouse spaces. Because rental contracts are usually for around ten years and the rent for the full period has to be paid in advance, tenants preparing to leave Ghana before the termination of the tenancy are in a weak bargaining position vis-à-vis newcomers looking for business space. In spite of rather low profits and individual net gains of USD10,000–USD80,000 a year (if the business is running smoothly), most of my informants found it hard to take the final decision to pack up and go. There is always the idea of finally hitting the jackpot with one killer item. With all the ups and downs of the global economy and the Ghanaian market, many of my informants prolonged the liminal phase from year to

year and even indefinitely. As is so often the case, people are usually trapped in liminality by a whole set of factors and considerations rather than just one.

Given the historical experience of Chinese sojourners across the globe, it seems likely that many of the Chinese in Ghana will remain in their self-created liminal spaces without ever completing their ritual journeys and the third and final phase of the *rites de passage*, either by returning to China or integrating locally in Africa. Although many will probably remain in Ghana for most of their lives, few will end the journey by deciding to make Accra their permanent home and strive for acceptance by the host society.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have discussed the recent and continuing wave of Chinese migration to Ghana. I have concentrated on traders as the numerically dominant group among Chinese nationals. Reports suggest that these traders are in a similar position to the Chinese in other countries in Africa. My sample of around 120 Chinese informants can therefore serve as a typical example, representative of the new Chinese in Africa.[6] The chapter asks why Chinese migrants refrain from enacting Chinese identities, why they fail to build a Chinese community, why they do not integrate into African society and why their diasporic lives remain transient and temporary.

The lack of visible enactments of Chinese identities is caused by a set of factors closely associated with the particularities of the economic sojourn and the host environment as perceived by the Chinese. Basically ignorant about Ghana but exposed to media reports and hearsay about anti-Chinese sentiments both in Ghana and across Africa, Chinese economic sojourners see Ghanaian society as potentially hostile and themselves as highly vulnerable, both individually (because of the threat of armed robbery) and collectively (as ethnic outsiders competing with local populations). Although Chinese traders have undoubtedly contributed to widening the access to global consumption to poorer groups beyond the local middle classes, they are faced with the idea that goods of Chinese production are of inferior quality, don't last long and, as a consequence, are harmful, particularly to the poorest consumers. Unable to counter this negative image because of cost pressures from local merchants, the Chinese traders do not see fit to make a proud display of their Chineseness. Instead they disguise their ethnic Chinese identity, since everything Chinese has a negative connotation. Chinese brands and family names are avoided, as are public displays of Chinese rituals. Misperceiving local people's deep religiosity, the Chinese

in Ghana seek to avoid confrontation by refraining from public folk religious practices. Finally, the absence of extended families and peers is often used to explain why Chinese seasonal festivals are not observed in Ghana. In other Chinese diasporas, community-organized collective enactments of Chinese identities have filled this void, but this does not happen in Accra.

Community-building efforts among the Chinese in Ghana have been limited to initiatives by the Chinese embassy and Chinese entrepreneurs whose businesses profit from close links to both Chinese and Ghanaian authorities. The embassy and the entrepreneurs have tried to include the traders, but only half-heartedly. Traders generally resist because they do not think their interests are properly represented and they are suspicious of the additional cost of a close association with the embassy. Class differences have been an issue regarding the reluctance to join the existing club of big businessmen and women, but the traders have also shown themselves to be unable and unwilling to create their own local social institutions. Fierce economic competition, primarily with each other, in a buyers' market; the short time Chinese traders generally intend to spend in Africa; the traders' embeddedness within transnational family networks; and their individualized business strategies all stand in the way of any form of localized community-building.

Local integration into the host society often depends in part on the existence of functioning social institutions among migrants. The absence of community among Chinese traders in Accra hinders their incorporation into Ghanaian society. However, the decisive factor is probably the traders' failure to see Ghana as a place for settlement, despite their prolonged sojourns. They balk at cultural learning and adaptation beyond the bare minimum, and, in turn, they are largely denied acceptance and integration by a host society that is not ready to incorporate substantial numbers of financially stronger East Asians. Thus their transience is perpetuated.

Viewed through the lens of liminality, the economic sojourn of Chinese traders in Africa can be interpreted as a *rite de passage* in the form of a ritual journey. The inner logic of their transnational spatial mobility, their (indefinitely) prolonged presence in Accra and their failure to build a localized Chinese community or experience *communitas* calls for a focus on the second, liminal phase (the time spent in Africa) of the tripartite sequence that constitutes ritual journeys. Like refugees, asylum seekers and undocumented immigrants of any nationality or ethnicity around the world, many Chinese traders in Africa get trapped in liminality because of their alienation from the home society, their rejection of acculturation and integration at

the destination, and the particular modes and patterns of their trading businesses.

Chinese traders on their passage through liminality in Africa are profoundly transformed, accumulate skills and knowledge, and realize personal goals. But this transformation in the liminal phase of the ritual journey in which they engage through their economic sojourn in Africa is responsible for the fact that many of them are caught in a liminality trap. The strong conviction that the liminal phase is of short duration prevents them from transforming themselves, acculturating and finally integrating into the African context, individually and collectively, as localized Chinese communities. At the same time the liminal experience gradually alienates them from their culture and society of origin. The unlearning of Chinese social skills and values that seem largely irrelevant in Africa renders many Chinese traders in Africa incompatible with Chinese society or incapable of coping with the changes that have occurred there during their absence. Thus Chinese traders resist full transformation, which in return results in their rejection as dangerous and polluting (Douglas 1966) by Africans. They thus run the risk of prolonging the liminal phase of their *rites de passage* again and again, and becoming frozen in indefinite liminality. Cut-throat competition with other Chinese prevents them from achieving *communitas*.

Those who successfully complete the liminal phase and leave Accra usually find it extremely challenging to reintegrate into a rapidly changing China after years of absence and personal transformation. The many reports about Chinese traders setting up businesses in other African countries after completing the liminal phase in Accra suggest that this particular form of transnational trade becomes a semipermanent engagement with globalization from below, one that denies the participants reincorporation into China and at the same time ties them to Africa, where they are unlikely to integrate or build communities.

## INTERVIEWS

**Cao**, January 30, 2011, December 10, 2011
**Dai**, February 9, 2011
**Fang**, February 5, 2011, December 8, 2011
**Gan** February 17, 2011
**Hong** January 30, 2011, February 10, 2011, February 15, 2011, December 10, 2011
**Li** December 16, 2011
**Lian** December 20, 2011
**Lu** January 30, 2011, December 7, 2011

**Luo** February 4, 2011

**Shen** February 4, 2011, December 10, 2011, December 13, 2011, December 19, 2011

**Tang** January 27, 2011, February 5, 2011, December 9, 2011, December 11, 2011

## NOTES

1. In this chapter the term "migration" refers to movements of people between places in general and does not imply factual or intended permanent spatial relocation.
2. Unless otherwise stated, all information provided in this chapter is based on participant observation and statements shared by the great majority of informants. Information that cannot be regarded as representative of the whole sample is attributed to individual informants; names are fictitious in order to safeguard interviewees' anonymity. This data collection was part of two larger research projects on Chinese-African interactions in Ghana, Senegal and China, starting in 2011 and finishing by mid-2017. The research project, Entrepreneurial Chinese Migrants and Petty African Entrepreneurs: Local Impacts of Interaction in Urban West Africa (2011–2013), was conducted in close collaboration with my colleagues, Laurence Marfaing and Alena Thiel. The project West African Traders as Translators between Chinese and African Urban Modernities (2013–2017) was conducted with Laurence Marfaing, Alena Thiel, Kelly Si Miao Liang and Jessica Wilczak. Both projects were generously funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) as part of the Priority Program Adaptation and Creativity in Africa—Technologies and Significations in the Production of Order and Disorder.
3. It has to be emphasized that the Ghanaian authorities only record flow data (entry/exit statistics); no stock data are recorded. Although information gathered during fieldwork suggests that there are substantial numbers of undocumented Chinese operating in a legal gray zone (mostly visa overstayers who entered the country on tourist visas), publicized estimates often serve political purposes and tend to be inflated.
4. Particularly entrepreneurs from Fujian tended to incorporate friends and trustworthy partners into their kinship networks, establishing virtual kinship ties with persons without family relations. This practice seems to be particularly advantageous if family enterprises aim to expand and diversify their scope but lack specific expertise and/or capital.
5. Referring to Chinese migrants across Europe, Christiansen (2013: 149) suggests the existence of world-spanning communities based on "Fellow-townsman relationships, virtual kinship, fledging solidarity of those sharing similar conditions or speaking the same dialect or at least Mandarin, and a moral grid

of shared purpose, altruism, sacrifice, and co-ethnic compassion." In view of the fact that the Chinese migrants whom Christiansen referred to mostly originated from Zhejiang Province (or Fujian Province in some cases), and regarding the high degree of intraethnic fragmentation and competition where other Chinese groups are present, it remains rather doubtful that this claimed community has ever extended beyond family and virtual kinship networks.

6. South Africa, it has to be noted, is an exception. This country has one of the longest continuous interactions with China on the African continent and the Chinese, and it has one of the oldest, most layered and complex presence of people of Chinese origin and descent within the continent (cf. Park 2009).

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