



RESEARCH BRIEF

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Economic Migration of African Migrants to China in the Era of COVID-19: Tensions and Transitions

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Key Points:

- Racially motivated fears of the novel coronavirus have exacerbated preexisting tensions among African migrants and the local population in China, leading to a diplomatic crisis between Beijing and its African trading partners.
- During the first and second waves of the virus, African migrants in Guangzhou, China, were wrongly suspected to be the source of multiple COVID-19 outbreaks and subjected to extreme discrimination. This included the refusal of entry to certain businesses, excessive testing, and forced evictions, among other instances of prejudiced treatment.
- Pressure from African diplomats has elicited a strong diplomatic response from Beijing, but more action is needed to improve conditions for its African guests and prevent internal controversies from impacting China's economic relations more broadly.

Introduction

The era of the COVID-19 pandemic has fostered unprecedented challenges that have destabilized foundational social and economic relations on a global scale.¹ Since the first reported case of the virus in late November 2019, the doors to international travel and migration have been firmly shuttered, sparking an economic recession without modern parallel. More and more states have elected to prohibit or functionally block the entry of non-citizens or have instituted long-term quarantines to slow the spread of the disease.² Combined with xenophobic fears of specific populations as COVID-19 “super-spreaders,” a new and desperate isolationism has swept the globe.

This Research Brief will focus on one longstanding international relationship that has been particularly affected by the novel coronavirus – People’s Republic of China (the PRC or China) and its economic partners in Africa. While COVID-19

¹ David Dollar, “The Future of Global Supply Chains: What are the Implications for International Trade?” (Nov. 2020), <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-future-of-global->

[supply-chains-what-are-the-implications-for-international-trade/](https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-future-of-global-supply-chains-what-are-the-implications-for-international-trade/).

² See, e.g., Geoff Whitmore, “Latest Coronavirus Travel Restrictions,” FORBES (Jan. 2021), <https://www.forbes.com/>

originated in China, unease and discrimination generated by racially motivated fears of the virus have been directed towards Africans living throughout the PRC. These tensions have culminated into a diplomatic crisis as African ambassadors pressured their Chinese counterparts for a solution.³ This Research Brief will investigate, first, how internal controversies, like the treatment of migrants within China, may generate a significant impact upon broader relations with its economic partners, and second, how China responds to such developments. To narrow the scope of this Research Brief, the focus of this work will primarily revolve around the largest population of African migrants in China, who reside in the city of Guangzhou.

The Problem

China has shown a marked interest in furthering both trade and diplomatic relations with its African partners in recent years. In 2000, then-President Jiang Zemin launched the first Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, signifying the seriousness of its intention to engage the continent in the new millennium.⁴ Since then, deep economic ties have been gradually developed in terms of both investment and trade.⁵ From 2009 to 2019, bilateral trade between the

parties grew from \$100 billion USD to \$195 billion USD, almost doubling over the course of a decade.⁶ China has also specifically engaged African nations as recipients of its Belt and Road Initiative, a massive policy and investment program focused on the development of infrastructure to promote economic cooperation between Asia, Africa, and Europe.⁷

As economic cooperation progressed, Africans began looking to China as a new nation filled with entrepreneurial opportunities – what some would call “the Chinese Dream.”⁸ Migration to the state expanded drastically in the early 2000s, and Africans from nearly every country in the continent had relocated to the city with the intention of breaking into the exportation business in the “Factory of the World.”⁹ It is estimated that about 20,000 Africans currently reside in Guangzhou, but this figure does not account for a notable population of undocumented migrants.¹⁰

When news of the disease within its borders was first released internationally, China was swift to implement punishing lockdowns and travel restrictions to curb the spread of the virus.¹¹ While these measures gradually achieved their intended purpose, they were not without consequences for

sites/geoffwhitmore/2021/01/29/latest-coronavirus-travel-restrictions-january-2021/?sh=74375b04f8b4

³ “African Ambassadors Complain to China Over ‘Discrimination’ in Guangzhou,” REUTERS (Apr. 2020), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-africa/african-ambassadors-complain-to-china-over-discrimination-in-guangzhou-idUSKCN21T0T7>.

⁴ “The First Ministerial Conference of the FOCAC,” FORUM ON CHINA-AFRICA COOPERATION (2004), http://www.focac.org/eng/ljhy_1/dyjbzjhy_1/CI12009/.

⁵ “Data: China-Africa Trade,” THE CHINA AFRICA RESEARCH INITIATIVE (2020), <http://www.sais-cari.org/data-china-africa-trade>.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ “Profiles,” STATE INFORMATION CENTER (2021), https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/info/iList.jsp?cat_id=10076.

⁸ Asha-Rose Migiro, “Chinese Dream, African Dream: Achieving Common Development,” CHINA DAILY (Aug. 2013), https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2013-08/28/content_16927171.htm.

⁹ Shanshan Lan, MAPPING THE NEW AFRICAN DIASPORA IN CHINA: RACE AND THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF BELONGING 2 (2017).

¹⁰ *Id.* at 2.

¹¹ Emily Feng, “Restrictions and Rewards: How China Is Locking Down Half A Billion Citizens,” NPR (Feb. 2020), <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2020/02/21/806958341/restrictions-and-rewards-how-china-is-locking-down-half-a-billion-citizens>.

some of the more vulnerable groups residing within China's borders – and African migrants were no exception.¹² The unlucky few that chose to relocate to the PRC just prior to COVID-19 soon found themselves in dire straits: an economy in a near-fatal tailspin, internal travel restrictions, and the escalating price and low availability of international flights from the PRC.¹³ These factors, in tandem with rising xenophobic panic directed against Africans, soon forced the migrants into extreme precarity.¹⁴

Tensions between native Chinese and African migrants in Guangdong province are not novel. The most infamous incident that has become emblematic of strained relationship between migrants and their host country occurred in 2009, when, to escape the consequences of a passport check, an undocumented Nigerian migrant jumped from the second-floor window of a building and was severely injured.¹⁵ Rioters protested the treatment of the migrant community and demanded reform; however, these efforts were ill-received by the significant number of local residents.¹⁶ Later, national penalties for migration offenses including illegal entry, residence, and work (*san fei* or 三非) were

heightened in response to rising national sentiment towards strict border management.¹⁷

In the era of the coronavirus, negative perceptions of African migrant workers morphed into fear.¹⁸ During China's second wave of the virus in the spring of 2020, online rumors of Africans as the source of this latest outbreak were widely circulated on social media platforms, including WeChat and Weibo.¹⁹ While 90% of cases reported in the spring were found to have been spread by Chinese citizens, isolated instances of Africans testing positive became sensationalized.²⁰ The resulting suspicion of Africans as carriers of the virus cumulated into extreme instances of discrimination – both private and public. Businesses refused entry to black clientele, and many were rendered homeless as hotels and apartment complexes evicted black residents.²¹ Forced government testing and quarantining of Africans was widely undertaken, regardless of whether they had contact with persons who tested positive for the virus.²²

While primarily reported in Guangzhou, there were reports of arbitrary detention elsewhere in

¹² See, e.g. Cate Cadell, "Organised 'Overkill': China Shows Off Rapid Lockdown System After Latest Outbreak," REUTERS (Oct. 2020), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-china/organised-overkill-china-shows-off-rapid-lockdown-system-after-latest-outbreak-idUSKBN27F1DY>.

¹³ Jenni Marsh and Nectar Gan, "Africans in Guangzhou are on Edge," CNN (Apr. 2020), <https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/10/china/africans-guangzhou-china-coronavirus-hnk-intl/index.html>.

¹⁴ Hillary Leung, "Africans in Guangzhou Say They Are Targets of Discrimination Over Coronavirus," TIME (Apr. 2020), <https://time.com/5820389/africans-guangzhou-china-coronavirus-discrimination/>.

¹⁵ Marsh and Gan, "Africans in Guangzhou are on Edge," *supra* n. 13.

¹⁶ Heidi Haugen, "Destination China: The Country Adjusts to its New Migration Reality," MIGRATION POLICY INSTITUTE (Mar.

4, 2015), <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/destination-china-country-adjusts-its-new-migration-reality>.

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ Jenni Marsh, "Beijing Faces a Diplomatic Crisis After Reports of Mistreatment of Africans in China Causes Outrage," CNN (Apr. 2020), <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/04/13/asia/china-guangzhou-african-blacklash-hnk-intl/index.html>.

¹⁹ Marsh & Gan, "Africans in Guangzhou are on Edge," *supra* n. 13.

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ "China: Covid 19 Discrimination Against Africans," HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH (May 2020), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/05/china-covid-19-discrimination-against-africans>.

²² *Id.*

China.²³ Nearly 5,000 African students reside in Wuhan, the city where the virus originated.²⁴ Many reported that they were prevented from leaving campus after their governments failed to arrange repatriation flights around the city's comprehensive lockdown.²⁵ Even as the lockdown lifted, the prohibition on exiting the campus remained.²⁶

In response to public condemnation of these practices throughout the continent, African officials arranged phone calls and meetings with resident Chinese diplomats and drafted letters to the PRC's State Council, demanding the "cessation of forceful testing, quarantine and other inhuman treatments meted out to Africans."²⁷ These complaints were met with a mix of assurances towards further investigation into the matter or outright denial, exacerbating impatience with the government's lack of action.²⁸ A video of Nigeria's Speaker of the House of Representatives, Femi Gbajabamila, questioning Chinese Ambassador Zhou Pingjian about the government's lack of response was circulated on Twitter.²⁹ Little was

done to ameliorate the status of migrants until fears of the virus began to wane.³⁰

Chinese Diplomacy Efforts

The treatment of African migrants during the COVID-19 era ultimately elicited significant reparations from the PRC to mitigate the fallout between Beijing and its African partners. Since the waning of the second wave of infections, Chinese ambassadors have been engaging in a two-pronged diplomatic tour of the continent.³¹ Their first effort is part of the broader "vaccine diplomacy" initiative to provide medical aid to nations globally, including PPE (personal protective equipment), medical expertise, and vaccines.³² Along with advancing China's reputation as a powerful and reliable global partner, this effort also fills the function of improving the PRC's reputation in light of its delayed recognition of the virus.³³ In August 2020, China promised that providing vaccines to its African partners would be a national priority.³⁴ While criticized for the relatively slow rollout of the domestically-produced SinoPharm vaccine in

²³ Danny Vincent, "Africans in China: We Face Coronavirus Discrimination," BBC NEWS (Apr. 2020), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52309414>.

²⁴ Salem Solomon, "Africans in China Complain of Coronavirus-Linked Discrimination," VOICES OF AMERICA (Apr. 2020), <https://www.voanews.com/africa/africans-china-complain-coronavirus-linked-discrimination>.

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ Vincent, "Africans in China: We Face Coronavirus Discrimination," *supra* n. 23.

²⁷ Dave Kirton, "Treatment of Africans in Southern China Sparks Diplomatic Backlash," REUTERS (Apr. 2020), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-china-africans/treatment-of-africans-in-southern-china-sparks-diplomatic-backlash-idUSKCN21Y0PL>.

²⁸ See "Rumor Buster: Videos Showing Discrimination in China's Anti-Epidemic Measures are Fake," XINHUA (Apr. 2020), http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-04/24/c_139005055.htm. See also Marsh, "Beijing Faces a Diplomatic Crisis After Reports of Mistreatment of Africans in China Causes Outrage," *supra* n. 18.

²⁹ *Id.* See also Oloye Akin Alabi (@akinalabi), Twitter (Apr. 11, 2020, 3:30 A.M.), <https://twitter.com/akinalabi/status/1248690552486400001>.

³⁰ Jenni Marsh, "China Keeps Promising Africa Coronavirus Vaccines. But Where Are They?" CNN (Jan. 11, 2021), <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/01/09/china/china-vaccine-diplomacy-africa-dst-intl-hnk/index.html>.

³¹ *Id.*

³² Neil Edwards, "Vaccine Diplomacy: China and SinoPharm in Africa," COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS (Jan. 2021), <https://www.cfr.org/blog/vaccine-diplomacy-china-and-sinopharm-africa>.

³³ See, e.g., "Li Wenliang: Coronavirus Kills Chinese Whistleblower Doctor," BBC (Feb. 2020), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-51403795>.

³⁴ "Xi Jinping promises to prioritize Africa for COVID-19 vaccine," CGTN (Aug. 2020), <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-08-31/Xi-Jinping-promises-to-prioritize-Africa-for-COVID-19-vaccine--TpAaBgVQXe/index.html>.

Africa, which has only just begun during the spring of 2021, there is some indication that this is positively impacting the narrative.³⁵

The second prong of this tour is more traditional economic diplomacy. When conducting multiple visits to its partners in the continent, the PRC's Foreign Minister Wang Yi extended deadlines on interest-free loans in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, agreed upon the establishment of a multi-faceted intergovernmental organization in Nigeria, and promised future cooperation and importation of fish products from Seychelles, among other commitments towards economic engagement.³⁶ These broad-ranging initiatives strongly indicate that China is intent on preserving its ties with Africa, and upholding its role as "brother" and benefactor in light of sharp racial divisions throughout an unprecedented recession.

Moving Forward

China relies on the support of its African partners. Old and new tensions with Western powers, including trade wars with the United States and

Australia, limit the PRC's allies and its influence in international institutions.³⁷ As a voting bloc, the 54 countries in Africa represent invaluable legitimacy in transnational fora. For example, African votes were likely essential when Qu Dongyu, the Chinese candidate for the Director-General of the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, was elected with a firm majority by a secret ballot.³⁸ Beyond improving its image as a partner to Africa, the continent also represents a broad market for its domestically produced vaccines following its initial donations – which have been met with some suspicion from the West.³⁹

While the official narrative is to reaffirm China's zero-tolerance policy for discriminatory policies and blame the diplomatic rift on "manipulation by certain forces," the PRC has taken some more tangible measures to improve its image in Africa.⁴⁰ Aside from Foreign Minister Wang Yi's tour of Africa, there is some indication that the city of Guangzhou has begun to mandate "equal treatment" of foreigners in relation to coronavirus health measures.⁴¹ In practice thus far, this was

³⁵ See, e.g., "China to Donate 100,000 COVID-19 Vaccine Doses to the Congo Republic," REUTERS (Feb. 5, 2021), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-congorepublic-vacc/china-to-donate-100000-covid-19-vaccine-doses-to-congo-republic-idUSKBN2A42OI>.

³⁶ Marsh, "China Keeps Promising Africa Coronavirus Vaccines. But Where Are They?" *supra* n. 30. See also "China, Nigeria reach 7 consensus on deepening bilateral cooperation: Chinese FM," XINHUA (Jan. 2021), http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-01/06/c_139644317.htm.

³⁷ Marcel Theliant, "The Impact of China's Trade Restrictions on Australia," CAPITAL ECONOMICS (Dec. 2020), <https://www.capitaleconomics.com/clients/publications/australia-new-zealand-economics/australia-new-zealand-economics-focus/the-impact-of-chinas-trade-restrictions-on-australia/?tk=7ad9fdee6e3347e566887d4a5e7727ebf5ea8313>; see also Ryan Haas, "More Pain Than Gain: How the US-China Trade War Hurt America," BROOKINGS (Aug. 2020), [https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-](https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/08/07/more-pain-than-gain-how-the-us-china-trade-war-hurt-america/)

[chaos/2020/08/07/more-pain-than-gain-how-the-us-china-trade-war-hurt-america/](https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/08/07/more-pain-than-gain-how-the-us-china-trade-war-hurt-america/).

³⁸ See generally "Qu Dongyu of China Elected FAO Director-General," UNITED NATIONS FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION (Jun. 2019), <http://www.fao.org/news/story/en/item/1199116/icode/>.

³⁹ See, e.g., Sui-Le Wee, "China Wanted to Show Off Its Vaccines. It's Backfiring," THE NEW YORK TIMES (Feb. 5, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/25/business/china-covid-19-vaccine-backlash.html>.

⁴⁰ "Wang Yi: Zhong Fei Youyi Jian Ru Panshi, bu Hui Shou Yishi Yishi Yingxiang," (王毅: 中非友谊坚如磐石, 不会受一时一事影响) PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS (Apr. 2020), <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjzbzhd/t1769438.shtml>.

⁴¹ Feng Shuang, "Guangdong Orders Same Treatment to All Amid Epidemic Control," CHINA NEWS (May 2020), <http://www.ecns.cn/news/2020-05-02/detail-ifzvxzhm6834063.shtml>.

limited to the establishment of a complaint hotline to report unequal practices and a “foreigner assistance hotline.”⁴² While Beijing did indicate willingness to create a communication mechanism to foster engagement with the African consulates general in Guangzhou, it’s not yet clear how this operates and whether it will be an adequate channel for potentially sensitive dialogue.⁴³

Next Steps

In tandem with inter-governmental initiatives, it may be equally important to provide more direct support for the sizable population of Africans in Guangdong province to more directly address this diplomatic rift. This is not the first racially charged incident from Guangzhou that has sparked tension between the PRC and its African partners, and without further intervention, it is likely to persist. More community-based efforts, such as

state-sponsored education on racial stereotyping, may be a welcome initiative from African partners.

More broadly, the consequences of this new strain on China-Africa relations suggests that the PRC will need to be more cognizant of its domestic treatment of nationals from partner states if it wants to avoid such rifts and reparations in the future. Providing more substantive communication and support to its guests from economic partner states will need to be better prioritized to prevent impacting the nation’s established relationships and improve its reputation in light of this recent controversy.

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⁴² *Id.*

⁴³ “Waijiao bu Buzhang Zhuli Chen Xiaodong Jiti Huijian Feizhou Guojia Zhu Hua Shijie,” (外交部部长助理陈晓东

集体会见非洲国家驻华使节), PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF CHINA MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS (Apr. 2020), https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjbxw_673019/t1769211.shtml.