



Covid-19 And Chinese Reaction To African Migrants

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Abstract: *Coronovairus, also known as COVID-19 is an infectious disease ravaging lives across the world. This paper is an examination of Chinese relationship with African migrants during COVID-19 pandemic. It examines the relationship between Chinese and Africans amid the lockdown and as well investigates Chinese-African co-existence before the outbreak of the virus. The study derives its data majorly from documentaries which are subjected to internal and external criticisms for authorization. It was realized in this study that despite the invitation extended to Chinese doctors to assist Nigeria, and bilateral relations between China and African countries, African residents in China were maltreated and denied privileges. The implications of these on African-Chinese relations are increased in incoherent interconnectedness and fragile Chinese investors in African countries which are partly, some of the salient reasons for setback for emerging co-existence and economic ties between African countries and China after independence.*

Keywords: *covid-19; africa; migrants; relations; outbreak; lockdown*

I. Introduction

COVID-19 is a virus that affects animals and humans. The isolation of the prototype marine Coronavirus strain JHM, for example, was reported in 1949. The molecular mechanisms of replication as well as the pathogenesis of several Coronaviruses have been actively studied since the 1970s (Sunsan & Navas-Matin, 2005:664). It is not misplaced to conclude that the virus has been in the existence before COVID-19. Human Coronavirus (HCoV) have been known since the late 1960s as a group of viruses capable of infecting human and animals; they cause respiratory, enteric, hepatic and neurologic diseases that, some cases, especially when they infect the young can be severe (Ibid). It is important to note that foundation of respiratory septicity ranges cold to more to severe diseases such as “Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS), and severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and the most recently discovered Coronavirus (COVID-19) causes infectious disease. The World Health Organization (WHO) described COVID-19 disease Novel Coronavirus infected pneumonia in Wuhan, China on 29 December 2019 and named 2019 novel Coronavirus (Hafeez, Siddqui, et.al 2019). WHO officially renamed the clinical condition COVID-19 which was announced on February 2020 following guidelines previously developed with world organization for Animal Health (OIE) and food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nation (FAO). The Nation, (2020:21) also stated that the disease has been identified by WHO as the cause of an outbreak of respiratory illness in Wuhan Hubei providence, China beginning in December 2019. As of 21 June 2020, this pandemic had spread to 213 countries and territories around the world have reported countries with 8,900,168 confirmed cases, including 466,095 death and 4,726,445 recovered cases. The WHO has declared it a public health emergency of international.

II. Review of Literature

2.1 COVID-19 and its spread

The controversies surrounding the origin and outbreak of COVID-19 and political twist generated from it have been a major bane to accurate origin and analysis of the response of Chinese government to African migrants. The World Health Organization (WHO) received reports from China in February 2003 of new respiratory illness outbreak in Guangdong province. COVID-19 is a communicable respiratory disease caused by new strain of Coronavirus that causes illness in human. The disease spread from person to person through infected air droplets that are projected during sneezing or coughing. It can also be transmitted when humans have contact with hands or surface that contain the virus and touch their eyes, nose or mouth with the contaminated hands. The first cases of atypical pneumonia emerged in Guangdong province in China in the late 2002. Parra, (2003) who is a novel virus was isolated from patients' lungs and sputa and cultivated on a monkey kidney cell line. The sequence information demonstrated that this was a previously unrecognized Coronavirus. The epidemic was controlled by strict isolation of patients in 2003. By the end of the epidemic, the CDC and WHO reported more than 8,000 cases with more than 800 deaths worldwide (Sunsan & Navas-Matin, 2005:649). The cases were reported from 29 countries, mostly in Asia, although North America was also affected, most notably Toronto, Canada. A total of 156 suspected severe acute respiratory syndrome cases were reported in the United States, although only 8 cases had confirmed serologic evidence of SARS-COV infections (Poon, Nicholls, et.al: 2004: 671). As indicated above, COVID-19 predated 21th century. However, earlier epidemic includes Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS), first reported in Saudi Arabia in September 2012, and Severe Acute Respiratory syndrome (SARS), identified in Southern China in 2003. Otrompke (2014), in early 2020, after a December 2019 outbreak in China, in Wuhan, a city in China's Hubei province with a population of 11 million, the World Health Organization identified SAR-COV-2 as new type of Coronavirus. The virus spread to over 200 countries and territories across the globe. The disease can trigger what doctors call a respiratory track such as sinuses, nose and throat or lower respiratory tract (Zhu, Yang B, et al: 2020) . The proponents of scientific arguments have it that the origin of COVID-19 is wildlife that is neither biblical nor political. The conspiracy theory revolving the emergence of the virus is to create tension, prejudice the global interconnectedness in the fight against the virus (Akinterinwa, 2020)

After the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic in Wuhan, African countries started to prepare for cases that will eventually arise from their close contacts with China and other European countries, a primary trade partner and host to more than 80,000 African students (Le Monde, 2020). It is worthy to note that statistical models based on air-travel date from China identified some Africans countries such as Egypt, Algeria and South Africa at peak risk of initial introductions and spread in Africa. Egypt had the first notification of COVID-19 on 14 February 2020 which was a contact of a person with a history of travel to China. By the end of the first week of March, about nine African countries were reported to have over 40 cases. Most index cases originated in Europe where the epicenter had shifted by 13 March and these drove early spread of the pandemic on the African continent. Consequence upon the wide spread of the pandemic, 54 of 55 AU Member States (except Western Sahara) as at 22nd March, 2020 had reported over 100,000 cases and 3,100 deaths. The northern region of the African Union provided notification of the most cases at that time, 31% which is more than 31,000 cases from Africa and the highest regional case-fatality rate of 5%, with countries such as Egypt (15,003), Algeria (7,728) and Morocco (7,300) driving the overall numbers.

III. Discussion

3.1 Dynamism in China-Africa Relations

The political, economic, military, social, and cultural interconnectedness between China and the African continent dates back as far as 202 BC (Lennart and Jones 2000:176), although there was a major paradigm shift in the dynamics of China-Africa relationship when China embarked upon its “Opening up and Reform Policy” –a wide-ranging policy that gave birth to the new China 1958. The intensity of relations also changed: with its increasing economic and political power as well as hunger for resources China’s relations with Africa intensified (Mulugeta and Liu, 2013). China is Africa’s largest continent trading partner band through soft loans and export credits, which is peculiar to other governments. Modern political and economic relations between mainland China and the African continent commenced in the era of Mao Zedong, following the victory of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the Chinese Civil War. At the turn of the 21st century, the modern state of the People's Republic of China (PRC) built increasingly strong economic ties with Africa. In 2013, it was estimated that one million Chinese citizens were residing in Africa (The Economist, 2013).

It has been estimated that 200,000 Africans were working in China, in 2017. As of 2022, Eswatini and the self-declared Republic of Somaliland (recognized as part of Somalia) are the only two African states to have official relations with the Republic of China (Taiwan-China Diplomatic Competition). Apparently, trade between China and Africa increased by 700% during the 1990s and China is currently Africa's largest trading partner (Wonacott, 2011). China’s rise in Africa came about through its reform and opening up policy which was a hugely successful wealth creation formula developed and perfected as the ‘Chinese model’. Its importance in African politics, governance and development increased after the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) was established in October 2000, which designated itself to be an official forum to strengthen the relationship between both parties, coupled with the increasingly advanced participation of Africa heads of states and government in the forum, is indication to the improvement of the China-Africa partnership (Mulugeta and Liu, 2013). Apparently, about 42 African Heads of state were in attendance at the 5th FOCAC meeting in Beijing which was unprecedented. There have been increasing international concerns over the significant political, economic, and military roles that China is playing in the African continent (Mulugeta and Liu, 2013).

Apart from the modern Sino-African relations which began in the late 1950s, when China signed bilateral trade agreements with Algeria, Egypt, Guinea, Somalia, Morocco, and Sudan, China shown her diplomatic relations with African when Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai Zhou Enlai visited Ghana and established close relations with Kwame Nkrumah, who desired a united Africa (Mukalia 2004, p.6). In the area of infrastructural development, Africa has benefitted from China. It is observed, however that China is also a leading lender in 32 African countries as a whole. Funding of small-scale business and projects to support infrastructure, roads, and stadiums in Africa continent, most especially from Chinese government is topnotch. China and many African countries had had a long standing. Instructively, the flash of Chinese paltry traders of Africa followed the huge push of Chinese Africa trade and investment since about 2005.

3.2 Motivating Factors behind African Migrants in China

The number of Africans in China cannot be clearly ascertained. It is worthy of note that, China was rarely the preferred destination of African migrants. It is rather offered a second-best alternative, usually obtainable with the help of migration brokers (Mukalia 2004, p.6). It is estimated that about 500,000 Africans are resident in China while between 2 million Chinese migrants in Africa. China's economy in the early 2000s shaped new spaces for African migrant entrepreneurs to have a share of international value chains. It transforms social and business relations of the two countries into urban space (Ibid). The Chinese are involved in growing prominence of Sino-African relation. The experiences of immigrants in both regions will continue to grow. One of the underpinning factors that are responsible for African migrants in China is her flourishing economy.

3.3 Chinese reaction to African migrants during Covid-19

The long-standing anti-African feelings among the Chinese population, even among the Chinese migrants in Africa can be traced to racism and absolute Afrophobia during the pandemic. Africans, mostly from Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya and Uganda, were beaten up, evicted from their residence in China. Many were refused entry in hotels and even McDonald takeaway shops. African governments, the African Union (AU) and the United States protested vehemently these inhuman treatment and tried to put pressure on Beijing to stop the outrages, but mainly in vain (Asiedu, 2020). It is worthy to note that lack of public awareness about racial issues in China was one of the causes. One particularly case happened in 2016 when a Chinese laundry detergent commercial sparked uproar by showing a woman putting a black man into a washing machine who came out as a light-skinned Chinese man after a wash (PTI, 2016).

3.4 Sino-African relations and the Bridge

Relationship between China and African states is proven by a section of writers to be symbiotic, this relationship is predicated on mutual benefits. Although, the general perception is that African countries and people of African origin who reside in China are the ones at the recipient position, a careful observation shows that the benefit is mutual. According to the study carried out by Bodomo in the trading community of Guangzhou which is greatly populated by African migrants, the survey revealed that Africans in that China's community stand as the bridge between the Africans at home and the Chinese community (Bodomo, 2010), however, the summary of the findings is that, Chinese in Guangzhou first learn about African culture and business methods from the Africans who reside among them, and Africans in Africa and those who have just arrived in Guangzhou may study Chinese culture and business practices from the Africans who live there (Ibid, 695), nonetheless, beyond the bilateral relationships between African states and China, the perception of individual African migrant in China, and maybe, those who intend journeying to reside in China, is to find a relatively better means of livelihood and trading opportunities.

Nevertheless, the emergent of Covid-19 imposed concerns on the coexistence between African descents and their host communities in China, for instance, Chinese authorities came under intense criticisms over the allegation of discrimination and unfair treatments meted on the African migrants in the Guangdong province of China, according to the Human Rights Watch, not only that unscientific preventive measures were specifically imposed on the Africans in Guangzhou, but they were subjected to rejection while the landlords "...evicted African residents and forced many to sleep on the street and hotels, shops, and restaurants refused African customers" (Human Rights Watch, 2020), therefore, the reports of the disparity and discrimination of Africans in China in the earlier stage of Covid-19 have

introduced a new dynamic to African-China relations as Africans at home continue to reflect on China as unfriendly and unaccommodating.

3.5 Did China Discriminate Against African Migrants During the Tense Covid-19 Period?

There is plethora of evidences which were presented to justify the claim of discrimination against African migrants during the first wave of Covid-9 virus in China, different accounts from Africans who live in China were circulated to attest to the maltreatments, video recordings surfaced on the social media, reactions from African leaders, different humanitarian agencies, and the defense of the Chinese authorities to disclaim the reports also raised some pointers, for example, it was aired by Chinese state media that five Covid-19-infected Nigerian males reportedly violated quarantine and infected others, sparking the surge of mistrust and anti-foreigner attitude in the city (Human Rights Watch, 2020), this claim, of course, generated reactions from African leaders most specifically in Nigeria and Ghana, therefore, top officer from the Chinese Foreign Ministry labelled the claims of discrimination against African migrants as being "...immoral & irresponsible to sow discord" while he conclusively parried the claim as an "attempt to drive a wedge between China and Africa" (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

Moreso, it is evident that while China was battling with increase in cases of covid-19 virus, foreign nationals became center of attention as the district that inhabits the highest number of African migrants, Guangzhou, recorded a significant increase in number of Covid-19 cases thus local authorities suspected Africa as a source responsible for the importation of the virus, for instance, in Guangzhou, 76 percent of all foreign cases were from African nations, with Nigeria accounting for 36 percent of all cases (Brookings.Edu). Nonetheless, Covid-19 heightened tensions and (falsely) portrays Africans as a direct danger to the safety and security of native Chinese in Guangzhou (Ibid). It is noteworthy, however, that Chinese authorities have denied every sense of discrimination against Africans and other foreign nationals, but according to Yaqui Wang, China researcher at Human Rights Watch, despite the denial, "what they [Chinese] are doing to Africans in Guangzhou is a textbook case of just that [discrimination]" (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

IV. Conclusion

This paper established the age long relationship between China and African continent, and it unpacks how this relationship was influenced by the emergence of COVID-19 virus. The pandemic that has the Chinese city of Wuhan as its epicenter changed the dynamics of the world's politics and globalization, despite not being the first virus to be declared by the World Health Organization (WHO) as international emergency, the virus imposed an unexampled lockdown scenario in virtually every community in the world. However, as the virus continues to spread beyond borders with its existential threats, the relationship between China and Africa became strained, compare to what it used to be before the emergent of the virus.

We brought to the light, through this study, the numerous benefits availed by the bilateral economic agreements between China and many of the African countries which began in the 1950s, while the beginning of economic prosperity of China in the 2000s has drawn attention of the developing countries of the Southern hemisphere to China for numerous aids and bailouts, the continent of Africa has emerged the largest trading partner of China. Nevertheless, we argued that African minority residents in notable communities in China were greatly discriminated against at the nascent stage of the Covid-19 pandemic, even though the

Covid-19 virus does not have its origin in Africa, despite the claim of the local Chinese authorities.

Essentially, there are different motivations which appeal to African migrants who consider China ahead of other countries that might be willing to accommodate them, but the healthy trading partnership which African continent enjoys with China creates a sense of familiarity, nevertheless, while we attended to the question of whether China discriminated against African descents during the pandemic, we have also established that Africa had a different perception through different petitions over how “black people” are unfairly treated in China, and how it affects Africa-China relations.

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