



HAL
open science

“Rich but Vulnerable”: Chinese Migrants Meet Street-Level Bureaucrats in the DRC

Cai Chen

► **To cite this version:**

Cai Chen. “Rich but Vulnerable”: Chinese Migrants Meet Street-Level Bureaucrats in the DRC. 2023.
hal-04263769

HAL Id: hal-04263769

<https://hal.science/hal-04263769>

Submitted on 14 Nov 2023

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial - NoDerivatives 4.0 International License

Chen, C. (2023). “Rich but Vulnerable”: Chinese Migrants Meet Street-Level Bureaucrats in the DRC. *Routed Magazine*, 23. <https://www.routedmagazine.com/post/rich-but-vulnerable-chinese-migrants-meet-street-level-bureaucrats-in-the-drc>

“Rich but Vulnerable”: Chinese Migrants Meet Street-Level Bureaucrats in the DRC

Cai CHEN*

Summary:

Contrary to media’s depictions of China’s expanding influence in Africa, the Chinese in Africa, despite their economic privilege, experience “politico-administrative vulnerability” in their interactions with street-level bureaucrats. However, they are neither exclusively privileged nor vulnerable.



A police officer standing in the middle of the road (Courtesy of [Babur Yakar on Unsplash](#)).

Introduction

China's growing economic engagement in Africa has led to significant Chinese migration to the continent, including the [Democratic Republic of the Congo](#) (DRC). Previous research attributes [China-Africa relations](#) to power asymmetry. The Chinese state possesses greater economic and geopolitical influence than its African partners, and the relationship between Africans and Chinese is often based on [employment or supervision](#). Yet, despite their economic privilege, Chinese migrants in the DRC – as in other African countries like [Angola](#) and [Tanzania](#) – are subjected to everyday differential treatment due to the power imbalance with officials representing the power of the Congolese state. This article therefore addresses this particular form of migration-related inequality, drawing on ethnographic fieldnotes (2022-2023) from my ongoing doctoral research.

Chineseness in the Congolese's eyes

Hundreds of thousands of Chinese are migrating to Africa with the aspiration to “[get rich](#)” and “[climb the social ladder](#)”. The DRC is particularly appealing to Chinese investors due to its abundant natural resources, notably minerals. Chinese interlocutors I encountered are generally employed by state-owned or affiliated enterprises as engineers, managers, or contracted labourers, and self-driven entrepreneurs or traders. Regardless of their social origin or status, the Chinese enjoy significant economic privilege compared to the local population. Even low-skilled Chinese workers earn at least ten times more than their Congolese counterparts (\$1,500 versus \$150 per month), not to mention their supervisory positions.

The Chinese, like the Lebanese or the Indians, are often referred to by the Congolese as “whites” – “*Mundele*” in Lingala or “[Muzungu](#)” in Kiswahili. This blurred categorisation stems not only from the oversimplified distinction between black and non-black (white) skin colour, but also from the historical association with money, privilege, power, and authority of [white settlers](#) during the colonial era. Nevertheless, this simplistic perception does not imply that the Chinese are seen as equal as “real whites” – white Europeans or Americans – in the Congolese society.

My Congolese interlocutors, whether employees or business partners of Chinese migrants, share similar perceptions: ‘The Chinese pay low wages but demand long working hours. They aren't as generous as Europeans.’ ‘They're uncivilised and rude. When you say “Hello”, they often ignore you.’ ‘They dress so badly. How can big bosses wear shorts and slippers to the bank?’ ‘They aren't well educated. They don't speak French or English, just broken Kiswahili.’ The Congolese differentiate Chinese from “real whites” not only based on phenotypical traits (e.g., skin colour and eye shape) or nationality, but also on the basis of social class privilege and habitus (embodied characteristics and behaviours) such as the way how they dress and [behave](#), education attainment, and [linguistic ability](#). As such, in the eyes of policy implementors, the Chinese are rich but unrespectable and powerless compared to “real whites”.

Encounters with Congolese street-level bureaucrats

With a quick ‘Morning!’ I handed over my passport and remained silent to see how the “extortion” would take place. The officer checked my document carefully, then looked at me, saying “*makuta*” (money in Kiswahili) with a “pay me” gesture. [...]

(Fieldnote, 25 December 2022)

Before I travelled to Lubumbashi, some Chinese warned me about the “inevitable” extortion of Chinese passengers by immigration agents at the airport, regardless of whether their travel documents were in order or not. As a visiting researcher with a good command of French, I

managed to avoid paying a tip (*gei xiaofei*) by showing my invitation letter and French ability. However, other Chinese migrants, living on “other people’s land”, often suffer from targeted inspections, extortion, and even detention by [street-level bureaucrats](#), including immigration authorities, police (traffic, military, judicial), and tax revenue or customs officials.

[Corruption](#) permeates all levels of Congolese society from unimportant bribery to grand corruption. Chinese migrants engage in and benefit from this corrupt system to establish business partnerships, secure residence permits or operating licenses, and resolve any difficulties they encounter. Taking residence permits for example, the regular application process involves substantial time, money, and paperwork, creating many administrative difficulties for Chinese migrants. However, corrupt immigration authorities, on the one hand, issue residence permits on the basis of forged documents or allow those with expired tourist visas to pass through; on the other hand, they intentionally inspect every Chinese who is perceived to be rich and easy to solicit bribes from.

During my two-and-a-half-month fieldwork I witnessed 17 incidents of Congolese officials *zhao mafan* – deliberately searching for evidence of minor infractions of local regulations. These included a surprise visit by the judicial police to the place where Chinese live and work, which resulted in my unjustified handcuffing and the arrest and extortion of my friend Brother Li (several thousand dollars). Furthermore, some disadvantaged Congolese employees, together with officials, blackmail Chinese employers by using the ‘justice system in favour of locals’, as perceived by the latter. This lack of political power is referred to by American anthropologist [Derek Sheridan](#) as the “political vulnerability” of Chinese migrants due to China’s absence of colonial history and the repercussions of the illicit practices by certain Chinese. I, however, term it “politico-administrative vulnerability”, as it primarily unfolds at the level of policy implementation.

‘Money opens every door!’

Money plays a crucial role in the encounters between “rich but vulnerable” Chinese and “corrupt and prejudiced” Congolese street-level bureaucrats. As one Congolese domestic worker told me, ‘Money opens every door, except the one to heaven!’ By paying tips or bribes, Chinese migrants exercise agency by converting their economic resources into other forms of resources to counter their politico-administrative vulnerability vis-à-vis Congolese officials. This conversion between economic and political capital is not limited to [petty corruption](#). Chinese migrants also use their established [guanxi](#) (relationships, social capital) with high-ranking officials or politicians, or through other Chinese having such *guanxi*, to settle matters. However, this also involves paying bribes or gift-giving, albeit in different ways. Thus, the Chinese leverage their economic advantages in Congo to mitigate vulnerability in response to perceived unfair treatment.

* [Cai Chen](#) is a PhD researcher at the Laboratory of Anthropology of Contemporary Worlds (LAMC), Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB), Belgium. His ongoing doctoral research explores the ethnoracial relations of Chinese-Congolese couples living in the DRC. Chen’s previous work focuses on the interrelationship between migration and sexuality amongst gay Chinese migrants in France, featuring in [Journal of Chinese Overseas](#), [Migrations Société](#), and [The Conversation](#). Email: cai.chen@ulb.be