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## A Chinese Ethnographer in DR Congo: Reflections on the Field and Fieldwork

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### Summary:

Why would a Chinese PhD student choose to conduct anthropological research in Congo? How did he secure access to the field? Do Chinese-Congolese couples exist, considering the “self-segregation” of the Chinese in Africa? How does a Chinese ethnographer navigate his identity and positionality with both Congolese and Chinese informants in the field?

In a series of four blog posts, [Cai Chen](#), a PhD student at the Université libre de Bruxelles, provides insights from his ethnographic fieldwork experiences in the course of his ongoing doctoral research on Chinese-Congolese couples in Congo.

**Keywords:** Chinese, DR Congo, fieldnotes, fieldwork, reflexivity

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## [Part 1] Expatriation in Africa: The Genesis of a Research Project

First woman: What's that Chinese going to do in Congo? [with a ton of suspicion]

Second woman: Maybe he wants to visit our beautiful country. [both laughing teasingly]

On 14 December 2022, I took a flight from Brussels to Kinshasa to conduct a pilot fieldwork for my doctoral research. The above conversation took place between two Congolese women travelling together, as I stood in line to check in my luggage among a large group of black Africans and a few isolated white Europeans. This conversation was in French, the language I am fluent in, unlike others in Congolese local languages, of which I could barely make out the word *Chinois* (French term for Chinese). I feigned ignorance, outwardly pretending not to grasp the conversation, yet internally, I couldn't help wondering the underlying meaning behind the discussion.

I doubted that it was unusual for them to see a Chinese in Congo or travelling to Congo in my case, as David van Reybrouck ironically claimed that “[a] generation is growing up in Kinshasa today for whom a European is more exotic than a Chinese”.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, I used to work and live in West Africa (i.e., Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger) during 2016 and 2019. Based on my previous experiences, I knew that there was a large number of Chinese in the African continent, and it should also be the case in the Democratic Republic of Congo (hereafter ‘Congo’). However, I kept asking myself, “Why was it still unusual for the Congolese diaspora to see me there—travelling to Congo from Brussels—and what did they think of me as a visibly Chinese among them?”

On board, I was the only Chinese, indeed the only Asian-looking passenger on the plane. However, I had not expected to meet many of my compatriots, as I knew that Brussels is not a popular transit hub for passengers from China to Africa, compared to Addis Ababa and Istanbul among others. There may also be the impact of China's then zero-COVID policy until early 2023, but at the time it was much less difficult to leave China than to enter. Unlike previous trips that I had made to Africa as an expatriate working for a Chinese company, this time I went to Congo to conduct a pilot fieldwork for my PhD research project. I was a doctoral student in social anthropology at a Belgian university. As the plane slowly took off, I felt excited to be returning to Africa with a new role and the opportunity to discover another country, but without the fear, worry, and anxiety I had when I travelled abroad for the first time in my life at the age of 21 from Beijing (China) to Bamako (Mali) via Istanbul (Turkey).

Living and working in Africa was probably the most important turning point in my earlier life. Although I did not make a fortune there, after three years I was able to realize my dream of studying in Europe in an unexpected way. However, the influence of the material aspect of this experience was incomparable to that of the social environment in which I lived and the people with whom I interacted. It was in Mali that I began to pay attention to and became interested in the interpersonal relationships between people with different phenotypic traits (such as skin colour) and from different ethnic or racial backgrounds. Because of the classic Chinese pop song “Descendants of the Dragon” (*longde chuanren*), I always believed that I had “black eyes, black hair, and ‘yellow’ skin” like other Chinese. However, I was extremely confused when Malian children kept shouting “*tubabu*” (“white people” in the local language Bambara) at me as I walked through the streets of Bamako. In the same way, I learnt the equivalent term “*nassara*” in Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso). But I also heard the locals call me “*petit Chinois*” (little Chinese) instead. I have been asking myself and my local friends ever since: “How could I be mistaken for a white person? I am actually a ‘yellow’ person, and I look so Chinese, even with slanted eyes.”

Studying social sciences in the superdiverse Europe (respectively in France, Romania,

Spain and now Belgium) has brought me into a ‘new world’ and led me to many reflections about myself, my past, and the society. Taking my own “racial learning”<sup>2</sup> as an example, I have always been proud of being of the ‘yellow race’ (with different meanings in Mandarin) since my childhood because of the common mythical belief of the yellow lineage—we, Han Chinese, are descendants of the Yellow Emperor. Yellow was also the exclusive colour of the emperor in ancient China, representing power and majesty. Thus, in the Chinese context, ‘yellow’ transcends the simplistic phenotypical notion of skin colour. However, in the European context, ‘race’ is such a slippery term, and it seems politically incorrect to continue to be proud of my ‘race’. ‘Yellow’ evokes connotations of the “yellow peril”, a racist colour metaphor that portrays Asian people as a threat to the West.

Scholars in the North tend to conceptualise ‘race’ from the experiences of predominantly white societies. Why was I happy to be ‘yellow’ in China but not in Europe? Why could I be considered as part of the Whites in Africa? How do Africans perceive the Chinese and their ‘differences’ from ‘real’ Whites? It was with the great curiosity about the ideologies behind all these white-black-yellow encounters, that I decided to dedicate my self-initiated doctoral research to Sino-African ethnoracial dynamics in postcolonial Africa. Since I am studying in Belgium, which has historical links with Congo, and my supervisor specializes in conjugal mixedness, I chose to focus on a specific case study of Sino-Congolese intimate relationships, using the family as a primary site for exploring people-to-people interactions with China’s growing presence in Congo.

## References:

- [1].David Van Reybrouck, *Congo: The Epic History of a People*, trans. Sam Garrett, Fourth edition (London: HarperCollins, 2014), 533.
- [2].Shanshan Lan, *Diaspora and Class Consciousness Chinese Immigrant Workers in Multiracial Chicago* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 5–7.



“Boulevard 30 juin (Kinshasa)” by the author on 15 December 2022

## [Part 2] Connecting with Chinese in DR Congo: Entering the Field Site

I embarked on my PhD studies in October 2022. Despite my prior experience in Africa, Congo was still a new country to me. I questioned whether I could identify “at least 20 heterosexual couples [...] and a minimum of 20 heterosexual Chinese/Congolese individuals who had intimate relationships with Congolese/Chinese”, as outlined in my research project which I had submitted a few months earlier as part of my fellowship application. I initially intended to include same-sex relationships, but this plan has changed due to the challenges posed by the homophobic environment in both societies. To gain insights into the country and gather information about Chinese-Congolese couples, I mobilised a few strategies remotely, including (1) reaching out to acquaintances (former peers and professors) with living experience in DR Congo or connections matching the searched profile; and (2) using digital platforms (especially WeChat<sup>1</sup> groups and online forum) to identify potential informants.

I reached out online to my peers from my undergraduate French Studies program in China who had worked or were working in Congo as ‘translators’<sup>2</sup> for Chinese state-owned enterprises. They all confirmed hearing rumours or gossip about such couples, yet none personally knew any. This did not surprise me, as being a ‘translator’ for a Chinese company in Africa typically involves restrictions on freedom of movement outside working hours and limited contact with the outside world due to security concerns. I was pleased to learn these rumours confirming the existence of Chinese-Congolese couples, even though I had no direct contact with them. Through these informal conversations, I also gathered some initial data on the perceptions of other Chinese individuals in Congo towards these ‘mixed’ couples. For instance, my younger schoolmate Tian<sup>3</sup>, who worked as a ‘translator’ for an infrastructure construction project in Lubumbashi for a year, shared with me:

One of our [low-skilled] workers married a local [college] student. She’s eight years younger than him and studied computer science. The woman’s father seems to be a police officer. The man ‘bought’ his wife from the latter’s family for a bride-price of \$1,500. The Chinese man married her because he couldn’t afford to marry a Chinese woman in China with the [poor] condition and [low] income of his family. Everyone found this story unbelievable and wondered how anyone [Chinese] could marry a local woman.

I also had a conversation with Professor Zhang, who was my French-Chinese interpretation instructor. Professor Zhang served at the Chinese embassy in the Republic of Zaire (Congo’s name from 1971 to 1997) during the 1980s. His stories provided me with insights into the second wave of Chinese immigration to Congo under the regime of Mobutu Sésé Seko. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, thousands of Chinese, employed by state-owned enterprises or institutions such as hospitals and universities, were dispatched to Congo to work on cooperative projects funded by Chinese grants. According to Professor Zhang, almost all Chinese in Congo during that period were short-term contract migrants (3-4 years) who would return to China at the conclusion of the project. Consequently, Chinese-Congolese couples were not prevalent at that time. Nevertheless, with the deterioration of political stability, marked by two Congo civil wars since the 1990s, this influx of investment and Chinese labour came to a standstill.

Fortunately, with the assistance of another professor, I established contact with the first couple I would later meet and interview, and the Chinese woman became my ‘gatekeeper’. When I mentioned my plans to work in Africa after graduation in 2016, Professor Wang, also a friend of mine, said, “If you ever go to Congo-Kin[shasa] and need any help, I have a female classmate who married a Congolese, and they are now living in Kinshasa.” Thanks to Professor Wang’s introduction, I connected with Liyuan via WeChat. Since I prefer introducing myself

and my research project face-to-face, I didn't initially disclose my real purpose for going to Congo. Instead, I asked Liyuan for recommendations for my accommodation in Kinshasa.

Additionally, my 'translator' friends invited me to join several Congo-based WeChat discussion groups for the Chinese community. Through these groups, I obtained valuable information for my fieldwork from Belgium. These virtual spaces served as primary sites for my initial online participant observations among different groups of Chinese migrants in Congo, including the group for well-educated 'translators' and the Chinese 'marketplace' group, where individuals share business information and promote their goods or services.

I also searched online for potential Chinese gay informants before my pilot fieldwork. My previous research focused on young Chinese gay migrants in France, drawing on virtual ethnography. Building on this experience, I logged into the most famous Chinese homosocial forum of the 2010s (although much less popular now). This platform allowed users to connect and engage with homoerotic content such as pictures, videos, and novels. Navigating to the Friends Map section, categorized by Chinese cities and provinces, as well as other countries and regions in the world, I found a post updated on June 21, 2022, in the Africa subsection. The post read: "If there are any friends near DRC in Africa, you can connect to chat, eat, travel, and work together!" Connecting with Brother Li via QQ (another Chinese social media platform), I explained my upcoming field trip to Congo. Coincidentally, he was from the same municipality as me, deepening our connections and mutual trust.

Brother Li became another 'gatekeeper' for my fieldwork in Haut Katanga and Lualaba. Upon his suggestion, I booked a room in a Chinese restaurant, which includes three meals a day, for my stay in Kinshasa. He also assisted me in finding accommodation in Lubumbashi. Professor O. Kahola Tabu from the University of Lubumbashi offered me invaluable assistance by providing an official invitation, leading to the successful acquisition of a two-month visa for Congo. Only two months after the official start of my PhD studies, I embarked on my pilot fieldwork scheduled between December 2022 and January 2023 in Kinshasa and Lubumbashi.

### Endnotes:

- [1]. A widely used Chinese social media application both in China and among its diasporas.
- [2]. Their responsibilities extend beyond the basic translation of documents to include tasks such as purchasing, accounting, management, and human resources. However, both these enterprises and the individuals involved commonly use the term "*fayu fanyi*" (French translator) to designate those recruited primarily for their linguistic abilities. 'Translator' here is a convenient shorthand.
- [3]. All names in this series of blog posts are pseudonyms to preserve the privacy and anonymity of informants.



*"Arrived in Kinshasa. Santa too!" by the author on 14 December 2022*

### [Part 3] Segregated Interactions: Do Chinese-Congolese Couples Exist?

“Dear passengers, it’s 6:30 pm in Kinshasa [...]” [flight announcement]

On 14 December 2022, my Brussels Airlines flight landed on time at Kinshasa N’djili Airport. Upon arrival, I underwent a check for the Covid vaccination or PCR negative certificate before entering the airport’s arrivals hall. While waiting in line for passport control, I noticed an immigration officer winking at me several times. It took me a moment to understand that this officer would ‘help’ me with the document check—an occurrence common among the Chinese in Africa, as I had confirmed with the owner of the restaurant, where I was going to stay in Kinshasa, the need for their service to ‘pick me up’ at the airport. However, I initially thought the airport pick-up service meant that someone—the driver—would be waiting for me at the exit with a piece of paper bearing my name. “Oh my God, I will have to pay a lot more for this extra service that I don’t need because I speak fluent French and my travel document is in good order”, I started getting worried. The immigration officer assisted me through the document check and directed me to another man who would help with finding my luggage and navigating through customs. The latter then escorted me to the car park, where I finally met the driver who would take me to my initial accommodation in Congo. All three of them expressed surprise, saying the same words when they met and spoke with me: “Oh, you speak French!”

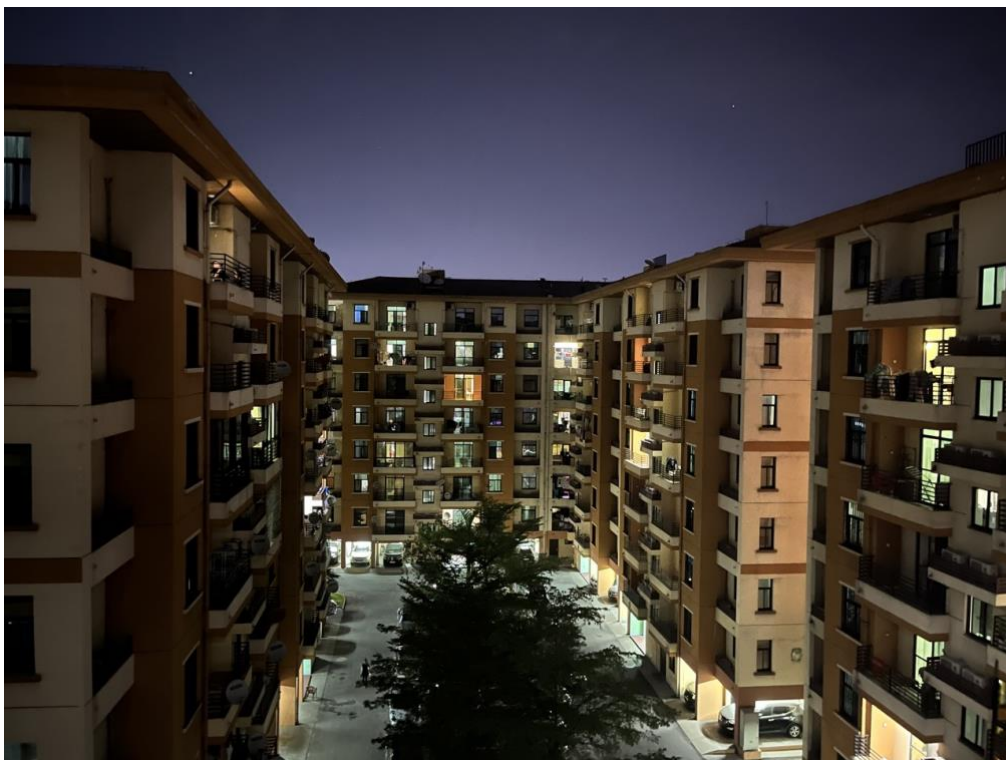
This thorough ‘pick-up’ service was arranged by (elder) Sister Lili, the manager and co-owner of the restaurant. The restaurant with five guest rooms occupies the top floor of an eight-storey administrative building belonging to the Congolese state. On my first night in Kinshasa, I was without internet connection as there was no WIFI at the restaurant. The next morning, my first task was to go out and buy a SIM card, knowing that I could easily find them on the streets, much like in other African countries I had visited. In fact, just around the corner of the courtyard on the boulevard 30 juin, I quickly found a vendor without the need for much exploration. The small ‘shop’ was bustling in the morning, and I had to wait patiently. Suddenly, a man shouted at me: “Aie, Chinese! You should go where the expats are!”. “Such hospitality in Kinshasa! It’s my first day here and I just want to get a SIM card.”, I replied. The man stared at me in surprise and then fell silent. The encounter left me feeling shocked, alienated, and othered. Reflecting on previous studies and my own lived experiences, I was reminded of the “self-segregation” of the Chinese in Africa. Nevertheless, I maintained a belief that there had to be various forms of people-to-people interaction between Chinese and Congolese, including intimate relationships.

After purchasing the SIM card, I headed straight back to my room. It was a Thursday, and the building was buzzing with activity. To reach the top floor, I needed to take the lift, but there were already three people—two women and a man—in the lobby awaiting its arrival. The building had three lifts in total, one on the right with the restaurant’s name on the door, and two others on the left (only one was operational). Earlier that morning, I had used the lift reserved for the restaurant’s customers and staff, which went directly to the top floor. As I entered the lobby, one of the lifts on the left opened its doors, and I rushed over to catch it. Just as I barely entered before the doors closed, one of the women spoke to me, pointing to the opposite side: “It’s over there for the Chinese!” Confused, I asked, “Why?” She responded, “It’s you Chinese who want it that way, and that lift there is only for Chinese!” I replied, “But this lift is already here, and I can take this one, right? Besides, it’s my first day in Kinshasa, I just want to go to the top floor, to the Chinese restaurant.” Surprisingly, she smiled and said, “Ah, you know how to express yourself in French. That’s good! Not like other Chinese. Welcome to Congo!”

When the lift finally reached the top floor and its door opened, I noticed the name of the restaurant on the opposite wall and a large red metal door on the left, marking the boundary of

the ‘Chinese space’ in that Congolese public building. Upon returning to my room, I found myself pondering which spaces belonged to the Chinese or the so-called expatriates in Congo and how everyday interactions unfolded between them and locals, in particular considering the language barriers they often faced. It appeared, however, that the Chinese in Congo maintained good relations with local officials, as evidenced by the privileged airport pick-up service. Nevertheless, a sense of concern crept in, fearing that I might encounter difficulty in finding Chinese-Congolese couples. On my first day, the observed ‘ethnic ghetto’ and tensions between people inside and outside intensified this worry. Despite this, I remained eager to meet Liyuan and her Congolese husband, the only couple I knew at the time.

Liyuan met and married her Congolese husband, Héritier, in China. They have three children and have been residing in Kinshasa since 2007. Our meeting took place at her restaurant. Similar to her intercultural family, Liyuan aspires to make their ‘unique’ Chinese restaurant accessible not only to Chinese or other foreigners but also to Congolese, serving as a bridge between different cultures and cuisines. When I disclosed the purpose of my trip, she readily agreed to participate in my research. However, she added a note of caution, saying, “But our couplehood may be different from others and can’t be representative.” In fact, both Liyuan and Héritier are fluent in French and Chinese, holding at least a master’s degree with academic training in social sciences. This background made it relatively easy for them to comprehend the nature of anthropological research and understand what researchers do or do not do with recorded interviews. For other Chinese and Congolese individuals that I encountered, I had to navigate the best approach to persuade them on one hand and continually negotiate my own identity and positionality in the field on the other.



*“Visiting Kin Oasis, ‘la cité chinoise’” by the author on 20 December 2022*

#### [Part 4] A “Developed” Chinese: Negotiating Multi-faceted Field Relations

My initial fieldwork experience in Kinshasa proved to be extremely challenging. Despite Liyuan’s assistance in reaching out to a Chinese man who had married a Congolese woman, my request for a meeting was declined. However, he agreed to respond to some questions through messages on WeChat. Additionally, not knowing anyone else in the city and grappling with the exorbitant cost of living in Kinshasa (where, for instance, a cappuccino cost me \$7), posed significant challenges. This financial strain was particularly burdensome for an ethnographer whose fieldwork was not funded. Consequently, just ten days later, I made the decision to relocate to Lubumbashi, where I found a more affordable accommodation with the help of Brother Li.

On the eve of Christmas 2022, my Congo Airways flight, initially rescheduled and then delayed for over eight hours, finally took off from N’djili Airport at 1 am and landed in Lubumbashi at 4 am the next day. While domestic flights usually do not involve passport control upon arrival, I, as the only visibly Chinese passenger, was stopped by immigration. This occurrence did not surprise me, given the prior warnings from Liyuan, Brother Li, and my ‘translator’ friends. They had all reminded me to carry some change and cautioned about the targeted extortion of Chinese individuals by immigration officers at Lubumbashi airport, irrespective of the orderliness of their travel documents.

With a quick “Morning!” I handed over my passport and remained silent to see what was going to happen. The officer checked my document carefully, then looked at me, saying “*makuta*” (money in Kiswahili) with a “pay me” gesture. I was taken aback by the directness, a behaviour I hadn’t encountered in other African countries. In response, I pulled out my invitation letter, pretending not to understand the word and the gesture. In French, I said, “Here you are, my invitation letter. Is this what you want?” Realizing that I was an invited researcher who spoke fluent French, she appeared surprised but persisted in attempting to solicit money, this time wishing me “Happy New Year!” Feeling increasingly unhappy and impatient, especially with an exhausted body at 4:30 am after the extensive delay of my flight, I replied, “No, no, today we say Merry Christmas! If you don’t have any more questions, may I leave now?” Unpleasantly, the officer returned my passport and remarked, “You aren’t like other Chinese!”

Brother Li picked me up at the airport with his driver and took me to what he introduced as “a semi-open hotel of one of his friends, Sister Liu”. When we arrived, it was already 5:30 am, and a power cut was in progress. Exhausted, I went straight to sleep. I’m not sure how many hours later, I was startled awake by the sudden opening and closing of the door and an African woman screaming, “Ah, there is someone in the room!” However, I simply rolled over and went back to sleep. Finally waking up around 11 am, I showered before venturing outside my room into the courtyard. I spotted a Congolese woman washing clothes near a door adorned with Spring Festival couplets—a typical ‘Chinese’ door. As she noticed me approaching, she greeted me in French. Jokingly, I replied, “Good morning, was it you who opened my door and interrupted my dream?” She burst into laughter and surprisingly responded, “Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t know anyone was there. Aie, how come you speak French so well? Are you French?” “No, I’m Chinese like others here, and this is a place for the Chinese, isn’t it?”, I replied. She explained, “Because you could speak French, and the other Chinese here only speak broken Chinese-style Kiswahili.”

In the following days, all the Congolese workers in the courtyard—including two housekeepers, a security guard, and several drivers—shared with each other and told Congolese visitors that “this Chinese is different; he speaks French, greets, and talks to the Congolese; he

studies in Brussels!” On separate occasions, my Congolese interlocutors commended me as a “developed” Chinese contrasting me with others they perceived as “poorly educated, badly dressed, speaking neither French nor English, and always ignoring people when they greet them”. However, this perceived ‘difference’ elicited negative reactions from a group of Chinese traders and entrepreneurs also residing there. During our initial group meal, I revealed that I was a PhD student in Belgium on a scholarship (albeit a one-year one) and that I was interested in the lives of Chinese-Congolese couples. Regrettably, the fact that I was “funded by the Belgian government” was misinterpreted, leading to the assumption that I was “working for foreign forces” and “reporting on the indecent sexual relationships of the Chinese in Belgium’s former colony”.

As a PhD student residing in Europe, my social and cultural position accentuated the social distance with my Chinese interlocutors, many of whom come from rural or working-class backgrounds. They often referred to me as “*daxue sheng*” (college student), rather than using my name or “*xiao chen*” (Chen junior), a term reserved for the more privileged individuals with a university education in China. Despite this, coming from rural milieu myself, I was familiar with their sociability and language. To bridge the social gap, I made concerted efforts such as sharing meals, adjusting my language register, and even altering my hairstyle (from a trendy, slightly long haircut to a finger length) to foster a more authentic connection. Moreover, I extended my assistance with translation or IT needs. In contrast, the dynamics with those working as ‘translators’ in large Chinese companies were different, given that they all received higher education like me at the time and speak decent French.



*“Chinese New Year Gathering” by the author on 21 January 2023*