



Chinese Migrants and Society in Mali: Local Constructions of Globalization

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Abstract

In this contribution, I shall consider the social perceptions of politics and economy related to the interdependences between Chinese migrants and local population in Mali. Such representations give a particular shape to a large number of identity constructions. In each specific context, the spaces and groups to which Malian and Chinese residents refer, highlight social representations of the two nation-states and societies, of their present relationships. Individual and collective strategies should then be analysed from a point of view stressing the links between economic rationalities and political constructions.

Keywords

Mali; local society; Chinese migrations; politics; identities; nation state; globalization

Introduction: Chinese Migration Flows to Mali, a Micro Sociological Approach

The introduction of Chinese enterprises and migrants in Africa is perceived today as an important stage in the process of globalisation. Since the early years of the 21st century, political scientists and economists have published an increasing number of studies on the subject. Rarely, however, do these studies take account of the differences that exist between different local contexts.

Studies tend to focus first and foremost on economic causality and inter-governmental relations (Kernen, 2007). Most of them share a macro sociological approach, effectively bringing out the overall economic and geopolitical tensions that affect social configurations in Africa (Niquet, 2002; Sautman, 2006). In a global framework that is characterised by competition for the control of resources, markets and international relations, the Chinese

government is viewed as opening up new economic territories and setting up a new political hegemony. Chinese migratory flows to Africa thus appear to stem from the strategies of the Chinese state. In the case of Mali, for instance, in the wake of major Chinese state-run corporations and multinationals followed a host of private Chinese entrepreneurs and, more recently, ordinary migrants without economic or social capital.¹ This latest wave can be looked at as a result of the global economic crisis and rising unemployment in China. The evolution of legislation regulating exit from Chinese territory indicates that the Chinese government intends to facilitate emigration as part of its strategy to address excess manpower (Pina-Guérassimoff, 2006). A stance of this sort, however, raises a number of theoretical and methodological questions.

The macro-sociological approach selects certain global dynamics that seem to be imposed on local societies “from outside” (Revel, 1996; Grignon and Passeron, 1989). This makes it impossible to account for the multiplicity of individual and collective strategies, of symbolic constructions and narratives that provide local societies with the arguments that legitimate them. Perspectives of this sort also hide the specific influence of the concrete local frameworks that constrain Chinese economic and migratory strategies in Africa. The sheer diversity of the latter and their rapid transformations are both underestimated.

As to the practices of the various factions of African populations – rarely, if ever, dealt with – they are seen as mere “reactions” (i.e. sporadic tactics) – of consumers attracted by Chinese products, and of the local shopkeepers and employees with whom the Chinese newcomers are competing. When the macro-social is paramount, populations are always considered as mere sets of “passive agents” on whom processes are imposed without their being able to act on them.

Considered from micro-sociological perspective, the picture of local processes is very different – a new landscape appears. Economic and social strategies, clashing and compromising, result in alliances that are marked by symbolic constructions elaborated by local agents, all of whom enter into a multitude of contexts (global dynamics, government, local societies) in a manner that seems to a large extent to be fortuitous. Some observers might then be led to isolate local singularities and to give pride of place – sometimes quite unreasonably – to the “autonomy of the social agent”. If one avoids this

¹ In some other West African countries, the Chinese state and larger Chinese investors followed small entrepreneurs. Jorgen Carling and Heidi Østbø Haugen point out that in Cape Verde (Haugen and Carling, 2005).

particular pitfall, the micro-sociological viewpoint can enable one to capture the multiplicity of Chinese migratory trajectories and forms of insertion, each linked to a specific characteristic of the relevant local African society.

I will be making use of information collected in the course of research I carried out in Mali between 2005 and 2009. The publications that resulted from it are centred on analysis of the interdependencies between Chinese economic activities and local social and economic dynamics (Bourdarias, 2009). It was then that I realised that the presence of the Chinese in Mali helped to bring out a whole set of conflicts internal to Malian society, giving them a specific form. At the same time, their migration to Mali has led the Chinese migrants to see, in a different light, their own society, their place in it, and their own aims in migrating.

In this contribution, I will be making some remarks on social representations of politics linked to the interaction between local populations and Chinese migrants in Mali. Constructions of the sphere of the political in Mali shed light on the multiple rationalities for Chinese migratory flows towards this country, flows that to a large extent turn out not to be directly controlled by the Chinese authorities. These constructions also call our attention to the numerous representations of the nation-state and of territory that serve as a basis for the articulation of the symbolic productions and practices of migrants on the one hand and of many Malian social groups on the other. The latter phenomenon, linked to singularities of the Malian context, will possibly not last. Nevertheless, it is one of the local productions of globalisation that has received little attention in analyses of global processes and transformations.

Research Methodology

In 2005, I undertook a research on the Chinese migrants settled in Mali. The accessible data concerning the Chinese companies implanted on the Malian territory were completed by observations in Bamako, Sikasso, Segou, Mopti, Kayes. The investigated population was constituted on this base. It is not a representative sample in the strict sense of the word: it is nowadays impossible to find statistics on the composition of this population or even a reliable evaluation of its size.² During the investigation, it appeared that the most relevant criteria were, besides the age and the social position occupied in China,

² Malian and Chinese authorities, researchers, agree on an approximate figure of 2000 Chinese nationals in 2009.

the conditions of installation in Mali. The interviewed population (60) is distributed, in equal number, in the following five categories: managerial staffers and executives employed in state-owned or mixed capital companies; skilled workers employed as foremen in the same firms; private entrepreneurs previously employed in Mali in state-owned firms; entrepreneurs who arrived directly from China; employees in small industrial and commercial enterprises. Interviewees were met several times, and questioned about their social trajectory, their professional practices and their lifestyles in Mali, the relations they maintained with their native country.

Several Malian social groups were selected according to their narrow relationships with the Chinese economic networks. Nineteen leaders of Malian political parties were interviewed about their conceptions of development and their evaluation of the foreign policies of cooperation. Thirty Malian engineers and academics trained in China, twenty-two traders belonging to transnational networks, fifty two unskilled workers employed on Chinese worksites were questioned about their professional practices and their relationships with the Chinese settled in Mali.

“The Chinese Came in with Modibo”

Maliens from all ranks of society often use this formula when speaking about the arrival of the first Chinese. Shortly after Mali gained independence, in 1960, the new state, with Modibo Keita as President, set up special relations with the USSR and China. Mali generated policies that were described as socialist. Development was linked to industrialisation, and the establishment of a state-run sector was intended to preserve the country's autonomy, avoiding allegiance to foreign investments (Constantin and Coulon, 1979). Malian companies multiplied in number. Experts sent by Chinese state-owned companies organised the first enterprises in agriculture and in textiles and took part in the development of infrastructures.

A new government was set up by a military coup in 1968, and the foreign policy of the country changed. Links with China, however, were not affected. Chinese aid was henceforth significant to the modernisation of Malian state-run industrial enterprises, which were transformed into mixed Chinese-Malian entities by means of a privatisation process that was to culminate between 1981 and 1985; these processes were again re-continued after the fall of Moussa Traore in 1991. Privatisation of public enterprises, followed by spectacular bankruptcies, led to widespread unemployment of both workers and management staff, some of whom subsequently found job in Chinese enterprises.

The presence of the Chinese state thus accompanied the birth of Mali as a nation-state. This relationship became an integral part of collective memory, orienting the latter's construction as well as shaping interpretations of the experience of economic and social vicissitudes. Modibo Keita's diplomatic and economic choices suggested strong government, capable of opposing the West in order to give the country economic autonomy. In the context of an acute economic crisis, the various components of Malian society are nowadays led to judge institutions and state elites in the light of such a policy. In some cases, the Chinese state itself is used as a model; in others, groups judge their own society according to the concrete relationships they have established with certain sections of the Chinese population. In all the cases already studied, irrespectively of opinions on the establishment of Chinese enterprises, debate has been centred on the definition of the role of the state and the conditions of territorial autonomy.

The recent change³ in the discourse of Malian trans-national traders is particularly enlightening. These traders have reaped ample benefits from the process of privatisation of Malian public enterprises, from the development of trade with China. The very late arrival of a few Chinese traders seems to be linked to their political and economic influence.

This specific characteristic of Mali should be related to the social position occupied by commercial networks in Mali, which ever since independence have been closely linked to the state apparatus and have sometimes been in conflict with it. Chinese goods reached the Malian market very early on, a few years after independence, in the wake of Chinese economic missions. Distribution and, to a large extent, importation, however, for a long time occurred through Malian trading networks, which were linked to numerous West and Central African countries, and were carried out by Malian entrepreneurs travelling to Asia, the Middle-East, Europe and America.

As of 1998 the strongest of these networks installed posts in Hong Kong, then in Guangzhou, soon to be followed by young traders with little monetary and social capital on the lookout for ways of launching their own enterprises. Initially, the massive establishment of Chinese retailers in Mali would not endanger any but the most vulnerable local enterprises. The competition that the trans-national traders are complaining about, however, is taking place at another level. Research in several fields in China brought to my attention the fact that Malian trade networks are now facing increasing competition from Chinese export companies; these operators are now familiar

³ I could observe it in 2008.

with African markets and with arcane local government traditions and customs practices.

Malian traders who once vaunted the merits of competition and globalisation now recommend protectionist measures and the development of local production. In addition to corruption and incompetence, the Malian government is now being accused of complicity with a foreign power. Some Malians, who have travelled to China return with revised views about their own country's development.⁴ Some of them conclude that what is needed is strong government, "as in China", "like in Modibo's time". References of this sort to the strong-government model, coloured with nationalism, also impregnate the discourse of Malian graduates who have trained in China.

Malian graduates who have received their technical and scientific education in China constitute a remarkably homogeneous group as regards their social origins and career paths. Children of workers and small farmers,⁵ they lay emphasis on their successful studies; they see themselves as remarkable students whose social origins had obliged them to opt for a technical rather than a general education. They had gone to technical colleges, and subsequently to technikons before winning Chinese government bursaries. Four years later they returned to Mali with engineering diplomas or doctorates (in mathematics, biology, or chemistry). Some of them⁶ are now working as teacher-researchers or as senior management in various government offices.

Most of them had had some difficulty finding work in the Malian private sector, and are now working in temporary positions as translators or in technical management positions in Chinese enterprises. All attribute to themselves the same subaltern position in Malian society; however, they belong to a "new elite" based on merit and mastery of theoretical and practical knowledge. The field of politics in Mali is thus confronted with a Chinese model that these graduates construct by mobilising recollections of their student days and experiences of work with the Chinese. They evaluate the institutions of their home country by measuring the degree of economic development that these institutions enable. Of course, they also pronounce ethical judgments on "corruption and social injustice", though on this particular point their attitude is pragmatic:

⁴ "They used to be like us... And just look what it's like here now: the roads, the cities, the factories! Then look what it's like in Mali... It's a shame! I'm ashamed to be a Malian!" Import trader, Guangzhou, 2008.

⁵ Those interviewed were aged between 35 and 47.

⁶ They had passed a competitive examination, gaining entry into government service before they were awarded Chinese bursaries.

The Malian governing class eats up 90% of the country's wealth, and the Chinese governing class only 30%! Poor people's children do have problems in China, but here they're completely blocked out... Misappropriation of 30%, one can tolerate that if there's strong government to regulate things and develop the economy.⁷

“Chinese style” development is also opposed to the Western model based on “aid and disdain”. These pragmatic intellectuals are not in favour of a coup d'état, but of taking over public administration and decision-making bodies. The arguments developed by people of this social category are similar to those put forward by leaders of certain opposition parties, particularly with regards to their notions of the state, development and national autonomy. In parties belonging to the coalition currently in power, the Chinese presence in Mali is presented above all as a means of opposing the “neo-colonialist aims” of the Western powers.

The same cannot be said of certain strata of the lower classes, in particular workers employed by Chinese companies. In Mali management, technical staff and a few skilled workers come from China, usually from the parent companies themselves, on two- or three-year renewable contracts. Unskilled labour and a few skilled workers are recruited locally for the duration of work on each site. This practice is directly linked to the low cost of local labour and, as some Chinese management staffs explain, to the docility of local unions.⁸

Working conditions on the sites have led local workers to develop new ideas about wage-labour and the role of the state in the economy. The remoteness of Chinese employers from their Malian employees is admittedly due to some extent to language differences, but it springs primarily from the organisation of production and labour relationships. Chinese foremen are the only Chinese to come into close contact with the local workers; they supervise them but are unable to communicate with them verbally. Local workmen see “the Chinese” belonging to a foreign world whose rules they cannot fathom. When they describe their working conditions, they attribute to the foremen behaviour that is bereft of rationality. Why, for example, must one “pretend to be busy all the time”, and not take a rest when something happens that interrupts work? Sanctions and dismissals seem to be entirely

⁷ Interview of a group of engineers, Bamako, 2008.

⁸ This does not hold for all African countries. Two construction companies studied in Mali in 2008 declared that in Algeria they employed between two and three thousand Chinese workers.

arbitrary. Wages seem not to depend on productivity; employers do not pay social contributions⁹ or overtime.

“The Chinese trample all over labour legislation” and “pay off the Malian officials who are supposed to enforce the law”. This legislation, however, is no better respected by Malian employers they had previously worked for, often in the non-contractual sector, where the pay was no better. But the workers mention, in this respect, that Malian employers gave gifts, which showed recognition of family status when there were marriages, deaths, or family difficulties; work relationships took account of neighbourhood relationships, alliances and religious affiliations. The new conditions that are being imposed on them in the Chinese companies are leading them to demand standard wage relationships, based on contracts and assessments of productivity, all regulated by the public authorities.

The Malian government is unanimously held responsible for the deplorable situation. Incapable of organising production, of “giving work” to the population, the politicians “hand Malians bound hand and foot over to the Chinese”. Lastly, they “eat up the Chinese money just like they ate up the (privatised) factories.” The Chinese government, in contrast, “puts up factories and gives work to its people”. Talk of this sort is linked to the rise in unemployment over the past two or three years, which has been considerable, and to the consequences of certain government policies, including: real estate speculation, expulsion of inhabitants to the urban periphery. The presence of an economic agent of a foreign state enables the population to accuse the elites and the institutions of betraying the independence of the nation. The figure of Modibo, frequently evoked, signifies the conquest of independence from the French colonisers. The current leaders are declared inept, incapable of dealing with the new colonisation or protecting the population. It is their behaviour that is being denounced, rather than the Chinese presence as such.

On the Malian side, the presence of Chinese migrants is interpreted and elaborated in symbolic constructions developed by different social groups. Confronted with the transformations of their society and gradual disinvestment by the state, they try to redefine the principles that should prevail in the spheres of work, ethics, and power. These antagonistic constructions may well heighten the tensions and intensify the social conflicts that are spreading through Malian society.

⁹ Under Malian law, employees must obtain a work contract after six months of activity in a company. The employer has then to pay a social contribution to the INPS (National Institute for Social Protection).

Temporary Residents and Foreigners. Chinese Migrants in Mali

The political context I have just described and the fact that the Chinese state-controlled sector came to Mali soon after Independence has shaped Chinese migratory flows into this country, giving them a peculiar form. It is in this particular framework that we should study the economic activities, the trajectories followed by migrants, and their constructions of identity.

Chinese activities and migrant population undergo rapid transformation. Towards the end of the 1990s, Malian population perceived “the Chinese” first and foremost as experts sent by their government to develop Mali. Nevertheless, besides Chinese state-run enterprises, mixed-capital companies were also moving into Mali¹⁰ and were already winning numerous contracts linked to Western finance and international organisations. A few small private entrepreneurs had already settled in Bamako. Between 2005 and 2009 Chinese economic activity in Mali intensified and was profoundly transformed. Its visibility increased. Chinese companies¹¹ have set up a large number of branches in Mali, specialising primarily in construction (road-building, civil engineering, waterworks) and in the design and organisation of industrial enterprises. The largest of these companies also invest in the local production sector.¹² At Bamako, the bar-hotels have multiplied, symbolising the growing ascendancy of the Chinese “private sector”,¹³ which is however anything but homogeneous, covering various branches of activity,¹⁴ varied in its individual trajectories, in its capital and in the social networks it is able to mobilise.

I have already mentioned that Chinese private enterprises came to Mali at a relatively late stage. It was at the end of the 1980s that the first of the private Chinese businesses was set up by some managerial and technical personnel whose contracts with state-owned enterprises had expired. This means that they have been able to select the most profitable activities: those that enable them to make full use of their professional skills, of the social know-how accumulated during their stay in Mali, and of their contacts in the civil service, politics and business. Depending on the financial and social

¹⁰ After the reform of industrial property rights in China (1997).

¹¹ In 2008, 11 state-owned and mixed capital companies were settled in Bamako.

¹² In Mali, in textile and agricultural and food production.

¹³ Renting rooms by the hour to prostitutes is their main activity; it is still highly lucrative, despite the increasing numbers of establishments.

¹⁴ In the construction, building and distribution sectors at least 60 private enterprises were doing business in Bamako in 2008: 9 in Construction and public works, 8 in industrial or craft production, 30 in import-export, and 13 in retailing. In Kayes, Sikasso and Bougouni, there were 6 production units in assembly of agricultural machinery, agro-business, cement works. In 2009, 102 Chinese-owned “bar-hotels” were concentrated in Bamako.

capital they are able to mobilise in their home country, they have invested in SMEs in the construction and craft production sectors, in import-export, hotels and small-scale retailing. Usually they explain their decisions by linking them to China: the rise of unemployment there, the difficulty of getting back into a subsidiary of the firm they work for, “obstacles to their career” in a conflict-ridden professional milieu, and low salaries.

Soon after 2005, competition intensified; the resultant conflicts brought out an opposition between the “private-sector people who have come from the public sector” (or the “Mali Chinese”) and the “Chinese from abroad”, i.e. those who have come directly from China, without first working for a Chinese public-sector company. New arrivals¹⁵ were obliged to fall back on the less profitable sectors, or to set up businesses demanding considerable capital. This particular population category is in fact highly diversified. It is composed of investors linked to networks that are already active in China, Africa and Asia; of small individual entrepreneurs with little capital; of employees, who in many cases are graduates, some of them managing hotels or working as translators in the import-export trade.

This social fragmentation is accentuated still further by the type of relationship the expatriates maintain with China; however, irrespective of business activity, professional status or age, the Chinese rarely think of Mali as a lasting home. They did not “have the means” to get to Europe, North America or Australia. Some of them still hope to reach these destinations, or to send their children there; others have given up such dreams. Mali, to sum up, is not usually seen as a particularly favourable place for economic accumulation. Indeed, for individuals who in China have little or no capital and social connections, it would seem to be a “last resort”. “Passing through” Mali, where they see themselves as “foreigners”, employees and entrepreneurs look towards the country they come from.

The Chinese population in Mali would thus seem to be composed of many social worlds. All are expatriates, but their spatial closeness appears to sharpen their sense of the distance separating them; this leads them to adopt strategies of avoidance, and sometimes to mistrust. Some individuals link explicitly their perception of the milieu of Chinese residents in Mali to an evaluation of the social dynamics that have developed in their home country: “In Mali, as in China, there is competition between us. . . . Today a Chinese is all on his own.” (Shopkeeper, 60, in Chinese)

A context of this sort leads individuals to reflect on the position they occupy in their home country and on the strategies that enable them to

¹⁵ These new migratory flows started up in the late 1990s.

reconfigure current social relationships. As a result they construct identities based on traits that separate them from other Chinese, both in Mali and in China: family history, education, training, future prospects, and modes of integration into Chinese society. As explained for the benefit of a foreign observer, their accounts of the paths they have followed illustrate the plurality of their relationships to political organisation; these relationships seem to be linked to the construction of “autonomous” territories in their home country.

Distanced from the State: the Outline of the Spaces of Autonomy

Except in the discourse of older managerial staff, representations of the sphere of state expressed in this context rarely refer explicitly to the Chinese state apparatus or to the principles on which the exercise of power is based. One can no doubt surmise that even in the course of informal conversations the presence of a Western observer probably influences interviewees’ statements. The spaces and calendars, however, that constitute the actual setup in which the stories are told, reveal social representations that are more deep-seated and more stable than those expressed as mere circumstantial opinions. It appears that these constructions are relevant to the sphere of the political. Seen in the light of Claude Lefort’s analyses, the sphere of power should not be thought of as a particular sector of social life, but rather as “a set of principles generating the relationships that people set up with one another and with the world” (Lefort, 2001).

The heterogeneous nature of the Chinese population living in Mali has already been noted. Life-stories recorded show that fault-lines run through the categories of status and economic activity. “Salaried managerial staff”, “entrepreneurs”, and other categories of this sort always amalgamate individuals who are in different phases of their careers, and who are also differentiated by the social contexts they have moved through, the resources available to them, and their future prospects.

Surprisingly, biographical narratives by, on the one hand, managerial staffers who are nearing the end of their careers in companies linked to the state, and, on the other hand, by skilled workers¹⁶ have a number of features in common. This can be partly accounted for by factors conditioning social mobility and by the ways in which professional skills were acquired. In both

¹⁶ Aged between 30 and 40.

categories, subjects describe career paths that go through a succession of work experiences and accumulate know-how in spite of adverse social constraints.

The managerial staffers, however, centre their narratives on political developments that have affected the history of their family lineage. Amongst those aged over 50, they have worked as labourers and “trained on the job” before being able to undertake formal study. Regardless of the milieu they come from, they lived through the Cultural Revolution while in their teens. Study brought some of them upward mobility; it enabled others to overcome their families’ decline in status.

First of all I was a worker, a fitter and turner in a plant near Beijing. I was 15 when the Cultural Revolution started... Then they started getting young people to study again; the production unit selected the candidates... I accepted an offer... It was quite daring; other people turned it down... (Managerial staffer, 57, in a subsidiary of a state enterprise; in French.)

In the course of informal chats, three managerial staffers recounted their family histories. The families had been destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. Disgraced sons of well-off farmers or of intellectuals, they had nonetheless been able to make an upward move by “seizing opportunities” opened up by transformations in Chinese society.

Their missions in several African countries were viewed as a way of rebuilding a family space that was secure in their homeland – the only place to which they attached any real importance. Their particular experience of the social constraints they faced, of state violence, and their notion of the “adapted individual” have left their mark on the way they think of the country they live in and of the relations they have set up there. Similarly, they judge Malian society by the efficacy of its institutions, by the degree of economic development that these institutions make possible, and by the framework for activity that they offer to individuals. For example, one interviewee remarked:

What’s needed (in Mali) is industrialisation. That’s what creates jobs and enables one to become independent. It’s not the case here (...) Real development is production... Now, I hope you won’t take umbrage, but the French try to act through culture, to bring Africans round to thinking the same way as they do; that’s how they think they can dominate them... A country can dominate another country through the economy, but if there are more and more factories, it’s way of liberating people. (Managerial staffer, 60, in a subsidiary of a mixed-capital enterprise; in French).

These themes run through many stories. Whether they are speaking about China or Mali, they regard frontal resistance to the system as vain. In their

collective view, it is industrialisation that frees individuals, enabling them to keep the state at arm's length; however, the state remains the source of the whole process of development. This dialectical inversion throws light on the notions of the individual that underpin the discourse.

The Chinese workers while occupying positions at opposite ends of the social scale, view their own careers in similar ways as the intellectuals. Their narratives are centred on the build-up of professional experience, punctuated by "chance events" that led them to "choose a path". Like the ageing managerial staffers, family is the main space to which they refer. Coming from working class and farming stock, they stress the fact that they have succeeded in keeping up their family's position by avoiding unemployment and loss of status. The sphere of the political is never explicitly evoked in their accounts. Dismissals had become frequent in China. Unemployment was mounting. The autonomy that they felt they had won – they sensed that it was precarious – was linked to the way in which they had served their apprenticeship and acquired their skills. They had learned the latter "on the job". All of them insisted on making it clear from the outset that they did not have diplomas and that "what they had to say would no doubt turn out to be of no particular interest". In fact they attached great value to the type of training they had received. Their relationship with the masters under whom they had trained as apprentices were assimilated to the familiar sphere of family relationships, in which they felt at home: "The master teaches the apprentice like a father teaches his child."

Family and trade (i.e. vocation) appear thus to be the only social spaces that individuals can really appropriate. It is from this viewpoint that they evaluate both their own society and that in which they are staying for the time being. They compare means and ways in work in Mali and in China; they find the training in Mali rudimentary. China seems to have progressed further along "the road to modernisation", but that is the only real difference. Their representations of Africa have been modified by this realisation: images of Africa broadcast in China are false; people have been "misled by propaganda". This assertion comes up so frequently in their discourse that it seems to show a desire to keep at arms length everything that stems from political power.

What they told us just wasn't true! They show films... The Blacks out there, living without clothes, in trees, and just dancing around all the time (laughter). We don't see anything like that here! They work; in the country they farm, too. When I go back I'm going to tell them all that, I'm going to set things right... But it's true, a lot of people went home and didn't say anything at all! (He laughs). (Electrician, 39, in a State-controlled enterprise, speaking Chinese).

In view of their own individual stories and the positions they assign to themselves in Chinese society, young managerial personnel in state-owned and private enterprises are more like the independent entrepreneurs, even though the latter belong to a different generation.¹⁷ Both categories see themselves as agents of modernisation, of the movement that they feel is characteristic of their homeland today. Their narratives feature rational individuals able to observe, in a suitably distanced way, their own society, its institutions, the obstacles that the latter put in their way, and the prospects that they hold out to them. Some describe at length the importance of social networks, the hold of money on society, and increasing competition between individuals. Seen in this context, their success is linked to merit and to social skills. In their discourse the preferred space of reference is the enterprise; it is there that they set up their social networks.

Despite the similarities in viewpoints, the two categories, however, do not have the same resources: diplomas, and capital, monetary and social. This criterion has a strong influence in orienting the construction of the spaces and groups that function as their references. Young managerial personnel and trans-national investors (not yet very numerous in Mali) are the only categories whose discourse sometimes evokes the “mobile trans-national cosmopolitan”, a figure and social model to which they frequently refer. The spaces they pass through and the relationships they establish there guarantee their “freedom to get ahead in Chinese society”. Their contact with Malian society is limited; it is based on mere curiosity, the “desire to see things that are different”. In fact, some of them compare themselves to “travellers”.

For entrepreneurs who have passed through the “state sector”, in contrast, social networks built up in Mali are essential for the development and survival of their enterprise. This particular category of entrepreneurs is that which is most likely to form a small group of relatively stable Chinese residents in Mali. They nonetheless travel frequently to China; in most cases their families live there. Mali is seen as the place where they have “won their freedom of enterprise”, and where they have “freed themselves from the constraints of hierarchy”. To succeed in China, they often explain, one has to have connections in local or central government.

This freedom, however, has a counterpart. They have to deal with the demands of the Malian state employees, and their local workers who apparently try to “hold them to ransom”. These constraints can be negotiated without much trouble: after all “it’s all only about money.” Many of the entrepreneurs’ anecdotes, however, show that demands can also affect “private

¹⁷ 35 to 50 years old.

life” and relations with the “natives”. These entrepreneurs thus detach the space of economic autonomy (Mali), from the space of social autonomy that they are attempting to setup in China.

I'll soon be going back to China for the rest of my life... Over there, with a bit of money one can deal with a lot of things... Provided that one doesn't ask for anything...! There are one's friends, one's family... (This entrepreneur, 53, currently heads several commercial enterprises.)

Such a break between economic and social space differentiates this category from that of entrepreneurs who have come to Mali directly from China. Among the latter are many entrepreneurs already established in their home country and who have set up subsidiaries in Africa. They travel from one pole of activity to another, leaving management of subsidiaries to Chinese or local managers. Enterprises set up in foreign countries are seen in these cases as extensions of the economic territory of the parent firm in China, the development of which had been hampered by competition and government harassment. The creation of their Chinese enterprise is often presented as part of a family epic. For example:

L., 58, a native of Beijing, set up at Bamako a subsidiary of his Chinese enterprise. The “boss” defines himself as a “self-made man”. Though he comes from a family of intellectuals, he was not able to go to university; the Cultural Revolution had prevented him. As a young man he had “sold cigarettes in the streets”. “When China opened up” he had been able to set up an electrical construction firm in Henan, “thanks to his family and friends”. In the year 2000, coming up against competition, he looked around in Africa, and in 2004 set up an enterprise in Mali, and subsequently another one in Ghana. Africa, however, is only a stage; he would like to move on, to Canada and Australia; but he “doesn't know anyone out there”.

Since 2007 a new category of migrants has shown up in Mali. Chinese street stalls have been multiplying, as have peddlers. Some of these migrants are now wage earners who manage, on behalf of entrepreneurs who are doing well in other sectors. Some Malian officials see these migrants in the following light: “They're workers, peasants who come with their paltry savings; they seem to think this is the Far West”.¹⁸ They are mistakenly being treated as small independent entrepreneurs. On one point, however, reference to the conquest of the West may well be really relevant: the new migrants are entering unknown territory, “adventurers”, some might say. They have left a society where, by their own account, they cannot make ends meet, and for the

¹⁸ Conversation with a group of officials at the Ministry of Industry, 2006.

present they do not plan to return. Growth of this category may well rapidly transform the migratory configuration we have just described.

Interviews and observations already carried out show that the population in question is young (in majority under 35); in many cases they have had at least two years of higher education. The category includes a certain proportion of young women who are unattached. These people perceive their stay in Mali and their activity there as a passing phase. They are in Mali merely “to make money” in the hope of getting to the western countries – if they are “lucky enough”... They portray China as a society blighted with injustice and unemployment, and see their failure there as part of a social destiny. For example:

Z., 26, arrived in Bamako in 2006, from Yunnan, to manage a bar-hotel on the edge of one of the most poverty-stricken neighbourhoods of the city. The bar was frequented by young drug-dealers and local prostitutes. Asked why he had left China, he became very voluble in describing the unemployment and the atmosphere of merciless competition. At the end of the interview he explained that he had taken a three-year university course in economics, but that his diploma had been no use to him at all. He went on to speak about his father, a railway worker “who had made a lot of sacrifices so that his son could study.” (Translated from Chinese).

The Chinese migrants’ views – highly diversified – of economic and social autonomy show that the territory of their homeland, China, is still the place to which they are most strongly attached. Young managerial personnel with higher education, who see themselves as “trans-nationally mobile”, are the exception to this rule. Chinese entrepreneurs installed in Mali for some time, and those who have just arrived, have all come to Mali as a “last resort”. They tend to compare their own situation to that of the Chinese who have managed to establish themselves in more prosperous countries. Conditions of mobility, in China as elsewhere, reflect the inequality of positions in the social field.

Conclusion

The migratory configuration just described and the ways in which it relates to the sphere of the political should be thought of as transitory. All of this is linked to a particular phase of the current global crisis and to its local dynamics. I have attempted to show that, in this particular context, reference to the nation-state (by Malians) and to “home” (by the Chinese migrants) is located at the very heart of representations of the sphere of the political. Individuals interviewed saw as paramount the definition of the constraints that limit

their strategies, and of the conditions under which they can achieve some degree of autonomy when confronting the power of the state.

The policies applied by the Malian and Chinese nation-states thus define to a substantial degree the framework that affects mobility and settlement. Processes of “globalisation operating from the bottom up” are by no means exempt from this influence. The current context of economic crisis (intensifying the struggle for control of markets and resources) is perhaps helping to strengthen the framework. Yet, the orientation of migratory flows and the social forms that they generate are at least partly free from direct control by governments. Migratory logics and social representations of the sphere of the political observed in Mali can be read in two ways. One of these reads them as autonomous social productions; the other highlights the influence of the political and economic domination that enfolds them. All practices that can be observed in contexts of this sort raise problems for the observer. Claude Grignon and Jean Claude Passeron, analysing the notion of “people’s culture” (Grignon and Passeron, 1989), have suggested treating them as “palindromes with dual meanings”. We should ask in this case what each meaning owes to the other. In the case of Mali, it would seem that reference to the nation-state and to the actual experience of relations of domination have a powerful role in determining the practical and symbolical constructions developed by both the local population and the Chinese migrants.

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