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Chinese factor in the space, place and agency of female head porters in urban Ghana

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Abstract

Migrating from northern Ghana to the coastal capital Accra in search of work, female head porters ('kayayei') find themselves in social structures and spatial orders that are imbued with various relations of seniority and power that constrain newcomers' entrepreneurial options. Yet, with the recent arrival of Chinese entrepreneurs in the social arena of Accra's marketplace, these power relations and gate-keeping mechanisms have begun to change. In this article, we analyse how female head porters perceive and appropriate the opportunities that arise as a result of the Chinese being seen by both they themselves and others as outsiders to Ghanaian society. By unintentionally enabling head-load carriers to extend their actual and symbolic claims to spatial realms that they were previously excluded from, the Chinese traders are facilitating head porters' expanded role within the social construction of place and space in Ghana's main urban market centre. They are therefore altering the patterns of everyday interactions between these head-load carriers and their environment.

El factor chino en el espacio, el lugar y la agencia de mujeres kayayei en la Ghana urbana

Al migrar desde el norte de Ghana a la capital costera de Accra en busca de trabajo, las mujeres que trabajan como cargadoras con sus cabezas (kayayei) se encuentran dentro de estructuras sociales y órdenes espaciales que están imbuidos por diversas relaciones de antigüedad y de poder que limitan las opciones empresariales de los recién llegados. Sin embargo, con la reciente llegada de empresarios chinos en el ámbito social del mercado de Accra, estas relaciones de poder y mecanismos de control han comenzado a cambiar. En este artículo, se analiza cómo las mujeres kayayei perciben y se apropian de oportunidades que surgen como resultado de los chinos siendo vistos tanto por ellos mismos como por otros como personas ajenas a la sociedad ghanesa. Al permitir involuntariamente que las mujeres kayayei extiendan sus reclamos reales y simbólicos a reinos espaciales a los que estaban anteriormente excluidas, los comerciantes chinos están facilitando la ampliación del rol de las mujeres kayayei dentro de la construcción social del lugar y el espacio en el principal centro urbano de mercado de Ghana. Por lo tanto, están alterando los patrones de interacciones cotidianas entre estas mujeres y su entorno.

Le facteur chinois dans l'espace, le lieu et la capacité d'agir des porteuses de marchandises sur la tête au Ghana urbain

Se déplaçant du Ghana du Nord vers la capitale côtière d'Accra à la recherche de travail, les porteuses de marchandises sur la tête ('kayayei') se retrouvent dans des structures sociales et des ordres spatiaux qui sont imbus de diverses relations de supériorité et de pouvoir qui limitent les options d'entreprise de nouveaux venus / nouvelles venues. Pourtant, avec l'arrivée récente d'entrepreneurs chinois dans le domaine social sur le marché d'Accra, ces relations de pouvoir et ces mécanismes de contrôle ont commencé à changer. Dans cet article, nous analysons comment les transporteuses de marchandises perçoivent et s'approprient les opportunités qui se présentent, en conséquence de la perception des Chinois en tant qu'étrangers à la société ghanéenne par elles-mêmes et par les autres. En permettant, de façon non intentionnelle, aux transporteuses de marchandises d'accroître leurs prétentions réelles et symboliques à des domaines spatiaux dont elles étaient exclues auparavant, les négociants chinois facilitent l'élargissement du rôle des transporteuses au sein de la construction sociale du lieu et de l'espace au centre du marché urbain principal au

Ghana. Ils altèrent donc les modèles d'interactions quotidiennes entre ces transporteuses de marchandises et leur environnement.

Keywords::

- head porters ('kayayei')
- China–Africa relations
- spatial orders
- place
- gender

Keywords::

- porteuses de marchandises sur la tête ('kayayei')
- relations sino-africaines
- ordres spatiaux
- lieu
- genre

Palabras claves::

- mujeres kayayei
- relaciones entre China y África
- órdenes espaciales
- lugar
- género

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

1. Yeboah ([2008](#), p. 3) links the livelihood choices of female head porters to the Ghanaian economic crisis of the 1970s. Another widely cited factor are the liberalization policies of the 1980s and 1990s, especially substantial cuts in agricultural subsidies. Another root cause is seen in the violent conflict between Dagomba and Konkomba that broke out in 1994/1995.
2. Singular 'kayayoo', a composition of the Hausa word 'kaya' (luggage) and the Ga word 'yoo' (woman) (Agarwal et al., [1997](#), p. 261; Opare, [2003](#)). Everyday discourse about head porters is marked by scornful tones and widespread prejudice, for example the allegation that head porters make use of 'juju' to lift the heavy loads (e.g. Ghanaian employee (Chinese shop) D., 20 February 2011 interview; Ghanaian employee (Chinese shop) M., 2 December 2011 interview; Ghanaian employee (Chinese shop) W., 8 February 2011 interview).

3. Massey ([1999](#), p. 4) argues that

“the spatial” then (...) can be seen as constructed out of the multiplicity of social relations across all spatial scales, from the global reach of finance and telecommunications, through the geography of the tentacles of national power, to the social relations within the town, the settlement, the household and the workplace.

Our research takes into account the influences of international trade and China's role as a producer therein, as well as Ghana's political stance towards foreign importers and investors. In the present article, however, the level of analysis remains grounded – due to its historical association with foreign African entrepreneurs – in one relatively succinctly defined wholesale and retail area of Accra.

4. Research for this publication was undertaken as part of the larger project ‘Entrepreneurial Chinese Migrants and Petty African Entrepreneurs – Local Impacts of Interaction in Urban West Africa’ funded by the DFG Priority Programme 1448 ‘Adaptation and Creativity in Africa’ and conducted by the two authors and Laurence Marfaing.

5. Participant observation was carried out in Chinese shops and businesses we approached one by one in the limited geographic area of the central market district (besides sampling other business types across the entire Accra and Tema Metropolitan Areas). Fluency in Chinese was the main gate-opener to these businesses especially during the first fieldwork with the trade at a low point after the Christmas season. Informants welcomed the distraction from boring daily routines. Our long hours of observations and informal conversation in and around the shops revealed the empirical reality of the interactions between Chinese entrepreneurs and Ghanaian customers, employees and freelance service providers and hence served to critically triangulate often normatively framed statements from our Chinese and Ghanaian interview partners. In order to maintain a conversation as natural as possible, no recordings and hardly any note were taken during the observation sessions but immediately after leaving the places in the form of extensive voice recordings and handwritten notes on the content of both conversations and observations.

6. As of 2013, the Ghana Investment Promotion Centre Act, 2013 (§28.2), sets the minimum equity investment for foreigners seeking to invest in trade to USD 1,000,000.

7. The Zongo Lane area now emblematic of the Chinese presence in Accra already hosted foreign entrepreneurs prior to the arrival of the Chinese, especially Nigerians and Nigeriens.

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