

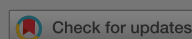
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Volume 16, 2015 - Issue 4423 | 5 | 1
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Articles

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

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Pages 444-464 | Received 22 Jan 2014, Accepted 01 Dec 2014, Published online: 08 Jan 2015

Cite this article <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2014.998266>

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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

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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

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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 Nige

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