

## **Understanding Mobility: Motivation, Recruitment, and Migration of Chinese Foremen to Zambia**

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### **Abstract:**

The recruitment of Chinese foremen and their migration to Africa is becoming increasingly significant phenomenon in current China-Africa transnational context. Albeit previous scholars consider the foremen migration is triggered by state power, my data shows that both the labor demand of the state-owned enterprises (the SOEs below) and the local African labor market without sufficient skilled workers function as the “pull” factor to stimulate Chinese foremen to work in Africa. Moreover, the high salary level and low daily consumption are the two favorable factors identified by researched foremen to achieve their goal of earning money in Zambia. As a result, the Chinese foremen migration is essentially driven by the interdependence of the SOEs power as well as foremen’s individual economic rationality.

Further, this study also analyzes the role of two types of recruitment tools of the private networks and the commercial labor service agencies in connecting foremen to their employers of the SOEs. Once being recruited, the SOEs function as foremen’s most important social bond and support sources; their relation continues to be very close until the employment contract comes to the end. This study offers a micro-level perspective to make Chinese foremen’s voices and feelings better understood in current China-to-Africa transnational context.

**Key Word:** Motivation, Recruitment, Migration, Chinese foremen, Zambia

## 1. INTRODUCTION: CHINESE FOREMEN MIGRATION FLOWS TO ZAMBIA

Since the 1990s, China and Africa have been mutually intertwined in increasingly profound economic cooperation. As more and more state-owned Chinese companies<sup>1</sup> have been undertaking African infrastructural constructions, large number of skilled or semi-skilled workers were recruited from China and then dispatched to work in Africa under the sponsorship provided by the Chinese SOEs. Only during 2014, the total number of Chinese migrant workers to Africa reached 214,534 and many of them are foremen (Li 2015). As the China-Africa economic engagement will be more deepened in the future, it is undoubted that this number will also be increased. However, what makes an apparent contrast to this situation is the fact that the related studies are still scarce; their migratory configuration is not yet fully deciphered. Due to the insufficient empirical data, important questions such as “what is the migratory force propelling these foremen to move to Africa”, “through what routines are they recruited”, “how the local emigrating communities are impacted by the global power during their migration process” are not well explored in existing literature. This paper focuses on a neglected, but highly visible Chinese migrant group, the Chinese foremen who are dispatched to work in Zambia. The purpose of this paper is to explore their migratory motivation as well as their preference of recruitment intermediaries. It also argues that the recruitment intermediaries played the key role in affiliating these foremen to their employers, the SOEs; and this affiliation later provides them sponsorship during the whole migration process subsequently carried out. It especially emphasizes that from a macro-level perspective, the currently ongoing Chinese foremen migration to Zambia is predominately driven by the SOEs power.

In Zambia, Chinese migration began in the 1960s, accelerated in the 1990s, and subsequently reached its current size in a comparatively short time during the first ten years of the new millennium. Compared to other African destination countries such as Ghana (Giese 2013), Senegal (Dittgen 2010), Cape Verde (Haugen & Carling 2005), and Namibia (Dobler 2009) where independent Chinese traders and retailers concentrate, Zambia is famous for huge number of the SOEs which have been intensively involved into different economic sectors in Zambia, especially the labor intensive construction industry (Bastholm & Kragelund 2009, Corkin et al. 2008). As the construction market in Zambia continue to be prosperous, some scholars believe that in the past five or ten years, Chinese construction companies have successfully gained 30 percent of the Zambia market; this fact convincingly demonstrates that construction has been “[the] largest commercial footprint in Africa” for China (Corkin et al. 2008: 3). As a result, the rapid development of Chinese construction companies, many among

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<sup>1</sup> Giles Mohan used the term “major state-influenced corporations” to refer to the same type of Chinese companies in *Social Relationships of New Chinese Migrants in Africa*, China Monitor vol. 26, Centre for Chinese Studies, University of Stellenbosch.

which are state-owned, triggered the migration flows of construction workers from China to Zambia.

These Chinese construction workers as “foremen” are affiliated with the SOEs; their presence in Zambia, though dated back to decades ago, has not yet specifically researched by scholars (Yang 2015). Zambia serves as an ideal setting to study the employer-sponsored Chinese migration such as the foremen. Based on the ethnographic data collected from 40 Chinese foremen from several construction sites in Zambia during 2013-2014, this study investigates the process that how Chinese foremen are first recruited, and then sponsored by their employers of the SOEs to migrate to Zambia to undertake construction tasks. It also analyzes the combined importance of both the urgent labor needs in destination countries and the foremen’s individual migratory motivation in shaping current Chinese foremen transnational transportation to Zambia.

## 2. PROFILE OF CHINESE FOREMEN IN ZAMBIA

Chinese foremen are skilled or semi-skilled workers majority of which are living and working on construction sites located at different locales within Zambia. My data shows that foremen generally account for 80 percent of all the Chinese personnel at any construction site; the other 20 percent are Chinese managerial staff who is younger and better educated than them. Even being mixed with these Chinese managerial staff, foremen can be easily identified as on-site construction crew due to their tanned and healthy-looking skin, rough hands, blue overalls, and grass-woven topees. Solely based on their attributes of blue-collar styled attire, these Chinese foremen are categorized as “labor migrants” (Mohan & Kale 2007:6) or “laborers” (Alden 2007: 52) which are factually inaccurate and misleading. Chinese foremen in Zambia are actually not manual laborers; instead, they are technicians (such as mechanics, electricians, etc), operators (of bulldozers, rollers, excavators, blade machines, etc), and organizers who lead the team of Zambian workers. In most of the cases, manual tasks are assigned to Zambian workers, not Chinese.

Foremen are largely the young male adults during the prime of their lives with the average age of 39 years old, ranging from 20 to 61. The average level of education is 10.83 years old, which equals eleventh grade of high school. The Chinese foremen community is worthy of the name “bachelor society” because there is no female among them at all (Djao 2003, Peffer 1999). Regarding marital status, 80% of them are married but leave their wives back in China and 20% of them are unmarried single young men. For those married foremen, separation with their families is the normality of their daily life though still hard to endure. For the length of time of staying in Zambia, on average each foreman has continuously stayed in Zambia for 21.2 months, ranging from 9 to 77 months. According to the regulation of the Chinese company, every foreman will automatically have the unpaid vocation of one month after their continuous stay in Zambia of 24 months; however, this policy is not necessarily applied to every foreman due to many complicated factors especially the very tight construction period.

These 40 foremen are from diverse geographical areas of mainland China. 11 (27.5%) of them are from Jiangxi, 6 (15%) are from Henan, 4(10%) of them are from Henan, 4(10%) of them are from Anhui, and another 8 people are from the other 8 areas of Shanxi, Sichuan, Yunnan, Jiangsu, Shandong, Chongqing, and Shanghai. Nowadays it is very common to see Chinese workers of different geographic origins in the same Chinese company in Africa. Job hunters from the remote inland provinces which are non-traditional emigrating areas are able to obtain employment from overseas Chinese companies via labor service agencies governmentally- or privately-financed.

As construction work requires team cooperation of workers of different professional specializations, there is heterogeneity of job designation, individual status, and income among these foremen who wear exactly the same, company-provided uniform. Take the researched 40 foremen for example; there are 7 engineers, 7 operators, 7 team organizers, 16 technicians, and 3 service staff. Among this team, engineers are considered more valuable than foremen who are non-engineers because of two reasons. First, engineers' professional skills and abilities of conducting surveying and measuring are demanded during the whole process of construction while the non-engineers' works are indispensable but only needed periodically. Second, as there has been a critical shortage of local engineers in Zambian labor market, the vacancies of Chinese engineers can hardly be filled if they quit job; it is comparatively easier to recruit local operators and technicians for the non-engineer positions. Moreover, foremen who are engineers also show higher educational level than their foremen peers who are not engineers. On average engineers received 14.57 years of education which equals a degree of two-year college while the non-engineers only receive 10.03 years of education which equals the tenth grade of high school.

In recent years, as the large-scale state-owned Chinese construction companies such as China Henan, China Jiangxi, China Geo-Engineering Corporation, and China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation have launched numerous infrastructure projects throughout Zambia, their usage of "Chinese labor numbered in hundreds (sometimes thousands)" (Alden 2007:3) has been interpreted as the result of their ignorance of unemployed Africans by Western scholars (Wang & Stenberg 2014). However, bringing Chinese foremen to Africa may be the only option for the Chinese SOEs (or any Chinese engineering company) due to the short supply of skilled construction workers in the local African labor market (Yang 2015, Corkin 2012). Recruiting these foremen from China and sending them to work in Zambia might result in high costs for their employers; however, this is the only viable solution since local skilled workers of the same caliber are scarcely available (Gadzala 2010).

### 3. FOREMEN'S MIGRATORY MOTIVATION AND RECRUITMENT

From a macro level, China's involvement of the global market in Africa is the fundamental factor to trigger the present foreman migration to Zambia. However, data from the survey of these 40 foremen shows that both individual foreman and institutions, including the SOEs as

employers and the labor service agencies, are important factors in motivating foremen migration.

To answer the survey question “what makes you to come to Zambia”, 90% of these 40 foremen report that they came to Zambia to “earn money.” 7.5% of them answered that they wanted to both enlarge their view and earn money. Only 2.5% of them only wanted to come to Zambia for enlarging their view. Table 01 shows the detailed information regarding the migratory motivation of these 40 foremen.

Table 01 Migratory Motivation of Chinese Foremen		
Motivations	Men (N=40)	
	Number	Percent
Earn money	36	90.0%
Enlarge his view and earn money	3	7.5%
Enlarge his view	1	2.5%
Total	40	100.0%

In the subsequent interview, foremen gave further information to explain why they believe they can earn money by working in Zambia; the primary reason is the huge wage differences between China and Zambia. For exactly the same or comparable position, the wage level in Zambia is much higher than that of China. Take the excavator operator’s salary for example, the general monthly salary caps out at around \$2,500 which is almost three times of the salary of the same position in most of the coastal cities in China. For engineers, their monthly salary ranges from \$500 to \$1,000 according to different geographic regions in China; the average monthly salary for working in Zambia is about \$2,000 to \$2,500. Moreover, there is a chance for these foremen’s salary to increase once their continuous efforts can be recognized by project leaders.

Except for the factor of high salary in Zambia, foremen also reported that they spent the majority of the money they have earned in China because of the daily cost is really high. As a result, they only have very low bank account balance though they continued to work hard. Bao, a carpenter from Henan, explained he is able to save his salary only through working overseas. He said:

“When I did the same job in my hometown in China, I earned \$10,000 each year which is above the average annual income in that city I lived in. However, when I have my salary at hand, I spent them rapidly; I have so many relatives and friends to support, so my money gone very fast. Eating outside also costs a lot. For example, one bowl of noodle is more than \$1.6 and this is the cheapest food you can have from a small local restaurant.” (Foreman#19, Male, Age 34)

However, when foremen are working overseas, their expenditures are largely curtailed primarily because the Chinese companies provide accommodation for their Chinese employees as well as health care. The second important reason is that the foremen cannot access their own salary earned in Zambia; as a result, these remittances sent back to their bank account in China exist as their net income. During the two year labor contract, one foreman whose monthly salary is \$2,000 may finally have bank saving balance of \$24,000 which is a large amount of money in the envious eyes of his Chinese neighbors. Foremen's salary is periodically paid every three or six months. The financial department of the Chinese company transfers their salary through Bank of China posted in Zambia to every foreman's bank account in China rather than giving out cash to them; in this way, the company leaders aim to impede the foremen who are heavy gamblers from squandering their hard-toil money in casino.

Company also provides foremen small amount of monthly allowance in the form of cash. Foremen can have monthly pocket money called "talktime fee" (充值费) as well as holiday subsidies at the three most important traditional Chinese festivals of the Spring Festival, the Dragon Boat Festival, and the Mid-Autumn Day. The sum of each holiday subsidy reaches K500, which equals \$83. The only cash they are able to get is their monthly pocket money, holiday subsidies, and project progress bonus, which is not common to see. The frugal foremen open a local bank account, deposit the money, and finally bring them back to China when they return while the extravagant ones spent them on cigarettes, beer, and billiard games.

After getting to know the basic working and living situation overseas, foremen who aim to earn money began to seek opportunities to be recruited to work in Chinese companies in different African countries. They told me that the SOEs are preferred to privately-owned ones due to the former's comparatively good reputation of reasonable salary package and regular salary payment. "The private contractors never deserve your trust, we have heard of too much of their evil doings such as failing to pay their workers on time." Wang, an experienced mechanic said, "The SOEs are more reliable because they are supervised by the state." As going to Zambia itself has been highly challenging for these foremen the majority of which have never been out of China, choosing the more reliable SOEs as their employer is definite a careful choice as risk aversion.

Foremen seek employment by the Chinese SOEs in Zambia in two ways: they make use of their existing networks as recommenders or they seek help from commercial labor service agencies. Table 02 shows the recruitment methods of foremen to Zambia.

Table 02 Recruitment Methods of Foremen to Zambia		
Recruitment Methods	Men (N=40)	
	Number	Percent
Referred by Acquaintance	23	57.5%
Referred by labor service company	17	42.5%
Total	40	100.0%

Table 02 shows that 57.5% foremen are referred by acquaintances while 42.5% are referred by labor service companies. This data demonstrates that existing social networks, as important social capital, can contribute to instrumental resources such as employment opportunities in this China-to-Africa transnational context. For example, one foreman described how he found current job by networking with his friend who came to work in Zambia prior to him:

“In 2008, one of my previous colleagues told me that one SOE got the project contract in Zambia and this company was recruiting workers from the city we were living; however, I did not really pay attention to what he said at that moment. Later on, he went to that company for interview and then, he was chosen to send to Zambia to work. You know, seeing is believing, so I also went to come to work in Zambia, too. So he recommended me to his leader by saying ‘he is so experienced worker that he can fulfill his obligation so well’. So finally I was also accepted by this company. Since I have never been abroad before, I do not think I can find current job if he did not help to recommend me.” (Foremen#31, Male, Age 42)

Being referred by any acquaintance is a preferred method to be recruited because it is reliable and free. However, for foremen whose networks cannot reach them to an overseas job, they have to seek assistance from labor service agencies, which are primarily privately owned. In this case, thousands of dollars are usually charged by labor service agencies in the name of service fee. Below is one foreman’s recruitment story through labor service agency:

“My salary in China is as low as ¥3,000 which equals \$500. My parents are getting old and my two children are still young. As nobody can help me to find an overseas job, so I went to P who owns a labor service agency and asked him to connect me to any overseas Chinese company. I paid ¥10,000 (\$1,500) and he introduced me to work in current company. He used to introduce my other colleagues to work in Zambia and this is why I dare to trust him.” (Foreman#40, Male, Age 41)

The service fee charged by labor service companies ranges from \$500 to \$5,000 according to the 17 foremen who sought recruitment through labor service agencies. The average amount is about \$2,000 to \$3,000, which is similar to foremen’s monthly salary in Zambia. For Chinese who desire a better-paying, overseas job, expensive labor service companies “namely the

Chinese government-licensed private employment agencies” are often their only option (Wang & Stenberg 2014: 79). The \$3,000 service fee is equivalent to only several weeks’ salary of an overseas position, which leads many Chinese to consider this charge worthwhile.

However, not all the foremen will be charged the labor service fee; labor service agencies would like to refer engineers to their employers for free due to their urgently demanded professional skills in the job market. Labor service agencies not only connect these job-hunting engineers to their employers, moreover, they are also eager to get to know unemployed engineers as many as possible as human capital in-reserve in order to fill any incoming job vacancies in the overseas SOEs. The beneath logic is that, strengthening their relation with the SOEs overseas is the critical part for the survival of any labor service agency; with the help of this carefully nurtured network, labor service agencies can gain large amount of service fee from non-engineer foremen who are referred to be recruited by the SOEs overseas. As there are always more non-engineer foremen than engineers in current job market, labor service agencies can earn much more money from these non-engineer foremen job hunters. During this refer-and-recruit process, the mutually beneficial relationship between labor service agencies and the SOEs is repeatedly strengthened. If everything goes well, their close cooperation can continue for years or even decades.

After the employer and the individual foreman have reached the agreement regarding the terms of employment, the human resource staff of the SOEs asked the foreman to hand in his passport for processing a business visa in Zambia. And then, the foreman was asked to wait for the company’s notification to depart for Zambia. It usually takes two or three weeks for employer-sponsored workers such as the foremen to get a one-time entry business visa to legally stay in Zambia for a total period of three months. After that, the employer is obligated to pay extra K4,000 (\$650) to apply for a temporary working permit with two years’ period of validity, which is still renewable after that.

For these foremen who are about to leave China, staying at home and enjoying life with their families is an unforgettable memory which would be recalled repeatedly during their stay in Zambia. The arrival of the passport with the recently issued business visa notified him that it is the time to depart. Within one or two days, he packed his bags, waved goodbye to his families, and finally reached the International Airport from where he takes off the flight to leave China. After flying for a total of twenty hours, the flight finally landed on the Lusaka International airport of rural Lusaka, the capital city of Zambia. As their employers expect them to start working as soon as possible, it is common to see that foremen are immediately sent to the construction project located at remote rural Zambia which is thousands of kilo meters away from the capital. Most of these foremen would not have a chance to visit Lusaka before their departure for China after the completion of their two years contract unless some sick ones come to Lusaka to seek treatment.

During the two years contract period of working in Zambia, foremen need to stay next to their construction projects most of which are located at remote rural Zambia. In most of the cases,

they live in the courtyard either built by them or rent from a Zambian landlord. As a small Chinese ethnic enclave, this courtyard which is called “Chinese camp” by local Zambians normally includes several flat dorm buildings, kitchen, dining hall, warehouse, toilet, shower room, mechanic’s firm, parking lot, and a small vegetable plot. After returning from the work site, Chinese foremen are encouraged to stay in the “Chinese camp” as long as possible by company leaders due to the security concern. Zambians cannot enter this “Chinese camp” without the permission from the Zambian guard at its gate sentry. As foremen are physically separated from local Zambians and most of them cannot speak English, it is common to see they are socially isolated from the locals even they have spent years in Zambia.

Living in the tiny “Chinese camp” enclave and remaining largely isolated from the locals, Chinese foremen heavily rely on their employers’ provision to make a living in Zambia. For example, living pigs, fresh vegetable, and tofu are regularly transported to the Chinese camp from Lusaka, the capital city. Labor protection appliances and other daily necessities such as toilet paper, toothpaste, and shampoo are given by employers every month. The employer is also responsible for providing health care service for Chinese employees who are working on remote sites. The company also hires a Chinese doctor to work at the construction site to provide immediate health care service to these foremen and office staff. The most commonly seen health problems are malaria, diarrhea, cold, and external wounds. If the health problem is too serious to be managed by the on-site doctor, the patient will be sent to Chinese clinics in Lusaka for treatment; in this case, the employer is responsible for all the health care expenses. It is always an established practice for Chinese employers in Africa to provide accommodation and health care service to their Chinese employees; in this way, they can effectively remove their worries by meeting their material and health needs.

Even the employers tried their best to improve the living and working environment for these dispatched workers, the life in the remote rural Zambia is always boring and tedious; foremen have nothing to entertain themselves during their leisure time except watching satellite TV and playing computer games. As a result, Chinese foremen are socially leaning on each other to get emotional and psychological support.

After the completion of the labor contract (which is usually of two years length), foremen can choose to either return to China or renew the labor contract to continue to work in Zambia. However, not all the foremen fulfilled their work obligations as the labor contract required; any foremen who are not satisfied with current job may quit it and return to China, or find another job at a different project. As any foreman can be connected to his other peers in other projects by phone or internet, it is very convenient for them to exchange employment information. Salary issues, the latest recruitment advertisement, working conditions, and holiday policy are among the top concerns of these foremen. Through these conversations, foremen collect plenty of information on the salary package and other aspects of work offered by competing Chinese construction companies in Zambia. If everything within the new job offer package is satisfactory, foremen who are job hoppers will seek the permission from current project

manager to quit the job and then take the new job offer in a different Chinese project within the same country or in a different African nation.

After working overseas for years, their initial purpose of earning money has been fulfilled; and then, they return to China to find a job in their hometowns or run their own small businesses. No matter what their options are, they may seek to work overseas again to satisfy the economic demand of their families if needed. Their complete retirement comes after their fifties as most of Chinese companies overseas do not consider employing workers above this age level for concern of their health.

#### 4. DISCUSSION: THE SOES POWER AS THE PROPELLER OF FOREMEN MIGRATION TO ZAMBIA

This case study of Chinese foremen migration to Zambia reveals the migratory configuration of nowadays Chinese migrant workers to Africa; moreover, it also stands as a representative of the migration flow triggered by the SOEs power. Various factors work together to form the sophisticated dynamics during the process of Chinese foremen's migration to Zambia.

At the macroscopic level, while the SOEs' intensive involvement into African economy has been heavily studied (Mwanawina 2008; Corkin, Burke, & Davies 2008), their role as the mobilizer of Chinese labor to Africa is chiefly unknown. This study shows that the SOEs have functioned as the powerful force to carry, and sponsor large number of Chinese foremen to Zambia, or in a much broader sense to Africa. These waves of the SOE-sponsored Chinese migration such as Chinese foremen to Africa have been categorized as the "new Chinese migration flow" (Mung 2008, Bourdarias 2010, Wang & Stenberg 2014) to be distinguished from previous self-sponsored Chinese business migration (Hsu 2007, Huynh et al. 2010, Park 2009, Kuang 2008, Mohan & Lampert 2013) and aid-expert-migration directly triggered by Chinese state power. As the SOEs are intensively engaged with the local Zambian construction economy, to recruit Chinese foremen to fill the vacant positions is the employer's only choice due to the shortage of skilled workers in local Zambia labor market.

From the micro level, Individual foremen show strong motivation to earn money via working overseas as other groups of migrant workers (Li 2009, Ratha & Shaw 2006, Holmes 2013); this goal can hardly be fulfilled by working locally due to the comparatively low income and high daily cost in China. During their employment process, both private social network and commercial labor service agencies function as the bridge to reach them to the SOEs overseas. To seek employment, it is the foremen's first choice to seek employment opportunities through their own social networking.

My study is the first documentation of Chinese foremen seeking employment referrals through their acquaintance and social networks. This phenomenon demonstrates that Chinese foremen highly value the role of their existing social network in seeking overseas job positions for its irreplaceable advantages of being trust-based, free of charge, and effectiveness in conveying

information. This study theoretically contributes to transnational anthropology and migration studies by filling the existing substantial knowledge gap in Chinese migrants affiliated with the SOEs. By analyzing the case of Chinese foremen to Zambia, this study examines the recently-derived “new Chinese migration” (Kuang 2008, Mohan & Kale 2007) to Africa triggered by multiple socioeconomic factors in the current landscape of globalization.

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