



# Africa Spectrum

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Hanisch, Sarah (2013),  
At the Margins of the Economy? Chinese Migrants in Lesotho's Wholesale and  
Retail Sector, in: *Africa Spectrum*, 48, 3, 85-97.

ISSN: 1868-6869 (online), ISSN: 0002-0397 (print)

The online version of this and the other articles can be found at:  
<[www.africa-spectrum.org](http://www.africa-spectrum.org)>

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Published by  
GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Institute of African Affairs  
in co-operation with the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation Uppsala and Hamburg  
University Press.

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# At the Margins of the Economy? Chinese Migrants in Lesotho's Wholesale and Retail Sector

Sarah Hanisch

**Abstract:** This article examines the relationship between the economic activities of Chinese migrants in the wholesale and retail sector in Lesotho, and the larger structural framework. More specifically, it investigates this relationship with reference to the general debate on Chinese migrants in Africa. These themes locate Chinese migrants at the margins of the economy, assume some Chinese exceptionalism, and imply a kind of neocolonialism. The article demonstrates that Chinese migrants are, in fact, not operating at the margins of the economy, but have become a vital element of Lesotho's wholesale and retail sector. The analysis of the structural framework indicates that the economic activities of Chinese migrants are a reflection of existing structural constraints and opportunities rather than Chinese exceptionalism or neocolonialism. This in turn implies that future research would benefit from placing the interplay of Chinese migrants and the larger structural framework in respective African countries at the centre of analysis.

■ Manuscript received 2 August 2013; accepted 6 September 2013

**Keywords:** Lesotho, migrants, Chinese, wholesale trade, retail trade

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Lesotho achieved a low score in the World Bank's 2013 Doing Business Report – ranking 136 among 185 evaluated countries (World Bank 2013). Even so, Lesotho is an attractive destination for migrants from other African countries as well as Asian countries such as China, India, Pakistan, the Philippines and Taiwan (Akopari 2011). These migrants, without necessarily becoming permanent citizens, engage in a variety of economic activities, ranging from investing in the manufacturing sector and running small service enterprises to operating wholesale and retail shops. As a result, foreigners have become a visible feature throughout Lesotho (Akopari 2011).

However, only one group of foreigners, namely Chinese migrants, has attracted considerable attention in the local media and among the wider public (Park 2009; Crush et al. 2010; *The Economist* 2010; McNamee 2012). The reason for this heightened public attention can be attributed in large part to the general feeling among Basotho that the presence of Chinese migrants has negative consequences for Lesotho (IRIN 2008: 2; *Lesotho Times* 2011). This applies particularly to Basotho engaged in the small-scale wholesale and retail sector, who consider Chinese migrants an immediate threat to their business prospects (Tanga 2009: 113; Crush et al. 2010: 67). Basotho employees of Chinese migrants likewise complain about the huge status and wage differences between Basotho and Chinese employees (Tanga 2009: 113). The perception that the Chinese sell low-quality goods is also widely held (*Lesotho Times* 2012a). Chinese migrants in Lesotho often feel victimised because the local population is hostile toward them (IRIN 2008; McNamee et al. 2012). As several Chinese migrants have been the victims of (ethnically motivated) assault (*Lesotho Times* 2010, 2012a, c), these sentiments are not ill founded.

Apart from these glimpses into the general perceptions, little actual research has been carried out. Local institutions have likewise collected little information on Chinese migrants and their economic activities. In this study of the relationship between the economic activities of Chinese migrants and the wholesale and retail sector, a survey in Mandarin was conducted among 86 Chinese migrants in seven towns, and semi-structured interviews were carried out with representatives from the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ, a German development organisation), and from Lesotho's Ministry of Labour (MoL) and Ministry of Trade and Industry, Cooperatives and Marketing (MTICM). In addition, statistical data kindly provided by the MoL, MTICM, and the One-Stop Business Facilitation Centre (OSBFC) were analysed.

This article demonstrates that Chinese migrants are not operating at the margins of Lesotho's economy. Rather, by improving the supply of goods and creating employment opportunities for the local population, they have

become a vital element of Lesotho's wholesale and retail sector. While the extent to which Chinese migrants create employment opportunities for the local population is "exceptional", three aspects of their economic activities – namely, the quality of the jobs, the legality of their businesses and the high asymmetry in the exchange relationship between local employee and Chinese employer – match earlier findings on Chinese migrants in other African countries. Building on a detailed analysis of the structural framework of the wholesale and retail sector, I argue that the uniformity of economic activities undertaken by Chinese migrants is not the result of an exceptional "Chinese" way of doing business in Africa, nor does it represent a type of neo-colonialism; rather, the migrants' activities reflect the existing constraints and opportunities within the structural framework. Consequently, the general debate about Chinese exceptionalism and Chinese neocolonialism should instead focus on the relationship between Chinese migrants and existing structural constraints and opportunities.

## Setting the Scene

Upon arrival in Maputsoe, a town southwest of Maseru, the capital of Lesotho, the visitor is struck by the diversity of small shops and supermarkets stuffed with goods, bustling with customers and seemingly competing with each other in playing the loudest music. The names of the shops, such as "Lucky Supermarket", may sometimes hint at the shop owner's country of origin. However, the overall picture does not suggest that this vibrant market is mainly in the hands of Chinese migrants. Inside many shops one is likely to find a Chinese migrant sitting behind the counter and watching Chinese soap operas, eating instant noodles or talking to employees.

Such observations can be made across the whole country and many Basotho will tell you the "Chinese have always been around". In fact, the first "Chinese-looking" migrants arrived from Taiwan in the 1960s as part of Taiwan's development cooperation with Lesotho (Pickles and Woods 1989; Taylor 1997). Shortly after, they started to open small wholesale and retail businesses. By the 1980s, Taiwanese migrants, together with the freshly arrived Taiwanese textile and garment industry investors, had established a "formidable economic community" (Akopari 2011: 92). Violent clashes between Basotho and Taiwanese migrants in 1991 put a temporary end to the mushrooming Taiwanese wholesale and retail businesses.

The vacuum created by the withdrawal of Taiwanese migrants in 1991 was not filled instantly, because of the unstable political climate in the 1990s (Matlosa and Pule 2001). With the return of stability at the beginning of the 2000s, migrants from mainland China started to arrive. Again, pioneer mi-

grants came under the auspices of government projects, but were soon outnumbered by migrants arriving on their own initiative and active in the same business sector as the Taiwanese had been. Today, the Chinese population in Lesotho is estimated at between 5,000 and 10,000 (Park 2009: 4), but these figures should be taken with a grain of salt. Official institutions such as the immigration office in Maseru, despite being filled with Chinese migrants, have no centralised database recording the in- and outflow of these migrants. Moreover, the Chinese population is in constant flux and, thus, difficult to capture in statistical records.

While today's Chinese migrant community includes people from all walks of life, our survey participants shared several characteristics. Typically, they were between 25 and 40 years old, married and had brought parts of their family with them. In the sample, 76 per cent came from Fujian Province, one of China's classic migrant-sending provinces, indicating that migration between China and Lesotho is shaped by actors from only select places in China. More than two-thirds of the 86 surveyed migrants were shop managers, and one-third were shop assistants. There are important differences between the two: The majority of the shop managers came to Lesotho with the intention of opening up a business, and shop assistants came mainly to seek employment. The majority of shop managers had operated a given business for more than five years, and were on average earning at least 1,000 LSL (approximately 100 USD) more per month than shop assistants while working six to eight hours per day. The majority of shop assistants had worked in a given business for less than five years, were working eight to ten hours per day and were on average intending to stay in Lesotho for a shorter time than shop managers. In other words, the occupational status of migrants influences the duration of their stay in Lesotho, their salary and their working hours.

## At the Margins of the Economy?

The involvement of Chinese migrants in the wholesale and retail sectors of countries around the world is frequently associated with small family businesses situated in an "immigrant or ethnic economy" (Waldinger 1986; Light et al. 1989), or "ethnic niches" (Zhou 2004; Logan and Alba 2003). In Lesotho, the economic activities of Chinese migrants in the wholesale and retail sector appear at first sight to fit the description of "entrepreneurial niche" (Logan and Alba 2003: 349), because many of the migrants want to set up small businesses. However, the term is misleading, because Chinese migrants did not create a new sub-sector or niche, but built their businesses on existing structures.

The majority of migrants surveyed operated or worked in small retail shops. Half the shop managers owned only one business. Chinese migrants' choices in terms of the nature and scope of their economic activities can be attributed to the overall business climate in the small- and medium-scale enterprises (SME) sector where the majority of the SMEs are "survivalists" (MTICM 2008: 6). The survivalist nature stems from the limited financial resources available both to (Basotho) business owners and to customers (MTICM 2008). These limited resources result from decreases in the disposable income of Basotho, in turn a product of decreasing employment opportunities for Basotho in both Lesotho and South Africa (Crush et al. 2010). This translates into a low and infrequent customer base, temporary employment and low profitability. To further complicate matters, major South African retailers such as Pick n Pay and Shoprite dominate the more profitable, large-scale wholesale and retail sector, making it difficult for non-South African businesses to compete. Against this backdrop, many Basotho – but also many foreigners – decide to operate in the small-scale business segment of the wholesale and retail sector.

The latter sector is important for creating business and employment opportunities for Basotho. Consequently, the government decided to restrict the access of foreigners to it. According to local law, small retail shops – namely, shops with less than 1,000m<sup>2</sup> of floor space – are reserved for Basotho. This means that at least some Chinese migrants are operating in restricted business areas. In fact, this phenomenon was frequently mentioned during the interviews with representatives from the MTICM and MoL. Yet, when they were asked what they would do about these illegal activities, they answered they would point this illegality out to the Chinese in question and try to help them comply with the law. One interviewee admitted that the main task was to "see that trade was running smoothly" and that it was "difficult to take these matters to court" (interview with MTICM representative, February 2012). In other words, it seems ministries are (reluctantly) tolerating Chinese migrants in restricted business areas.

That being said, many of the small retail shops I visited were quite large. Supermarkets and other bigger shops run by Chinese that qualify as legal can be found in district towns such as Leribe, Maseru or Maputsoe. Furthermore, 80 per cent of the 3,300 work permits approved between 2008 and January 2012 by the OSBFC were given out to Chinese migrants (OSBFC 2012). Considering that the OSBFC was especially designed for foreign investors or workers, Chinese migrants can be viewed as the biggest group of foreigners trying to obtain legal work permits. While these crude estimates should be treated cautiously, they still do not confirm the conventional wisdom that most Chinese migrants are involved in illegal activities.

Apart from open violations of the law, some Chinese migrants circumvent the restrictions by renting shops with a valid business licence from Basotho in exchange for a fixed monthly sum (interview with GIZ representative, February 2012). This practice is not only a direct response to the legal restriction, but also part of the expansion of Chinese migrants into remote and rural areas. For example, as early as 1999 a woman successfully sued a Mosotho and his Chinese business partner for “illegally” operating a supermarket and a gas station in Mokhotlong<sup>1</sup>; the woman felt that she had been put at a disadvantage (High Court of Lesotho 1999). That similar stories continue to be told indicates that this practice continues. These “cooperation practices” in turn alter existing business opportunities by providing more resources to some Basotho and, at the same time, increasing the pressure on “non-cooperative” Basotho shops.

Regardless of their legal status, Chinese shops play different roles, depending on their actual location. In larger towns, they provide a welcome alternative to the sometimes pricey durable consumer goods sold in South African supermarkets, which often source the same low-quality products from China, but sell them at a much higher price. Although food products sold in Chinese shops sometimes have a negative image because of an allegedly widespread practice of “re-labelling” expired goods (*Lesotho Times* 2012b), the Chinese supermarkets were bustling with customers. In the more rural parts of Lesotho, Chinese migrants created new shops. This means local residents no longer need travel to the next town to buy their daily provisions (interview with MTICM representative, February 2012). When asked what would happen if all the Chinese operating in restricted business sectors or rural areas were to leave at once, one interviewee answered that this would be “very bad for the local population, especially in the rural areas”. This shows that Chinese shops are an important element in the local wholesale and retail sector.

The surveyed Chinese shops created more employment opportunities for Basotho than for Chinese migrants: 74 per cent of shop managers and 65 per cent of shop assistants reported that more than four employees worked in their businesses, the majority of these being Basotho. By comparison, many Basotho-run shops of the same size seem to employ fewer people. In employing more Basotho than Chinese, the surveyed Chinese migrants are complying with the local law requiring foreign-run businesses to employ Basotho. However, a clear difference between the incomes of Chinese and Basotho employees exists. Generally, Chinese shop managers, followed by Chinese shop assistants, had the highest monthly income among all the employees in

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1 Mokhotlong is located in the mountain zone and is further from South African and other commercial hubs within Lesotho.

the surveyed businesses. Whereas Chinese shop managers earned between 3,000 and 6,000 LSL (approximately 293 to 586 USD) and Chinese shop assistants between 2,000 and 3,000 LSL (approximately 195 to 293 USD), Basotho employees earned only between 1,000 and 1,500 LSL (approximately 98 to 146 USD). These income differences can be mostly explained in terms of differences in level of responsibility. Furthermore, the salaries of Basotho employees, despite being much lower than those of Chinese shop assistants, still comply with local law, which stipulates a monthly salary of 1,080 LSL (approximately 105 USD) (interview with MoL representative, February 2012).

## An Exceptional Case?

Like every other country, Lesotho has its own history and distinct setting. At first sight, one might conclude that a study of Chinese migrants in Lesotho would be a study of an “exceptional” case. Indeed, the fact that Chinese migrants in the wholesale and retail sector create on average more employment opportunities for locals than for their fellow countrymen is “exceptional” because previous studies did not indicate that Chinese migrants create more employment for locals.<sup>2</sup> Across Africa, the small- and medium-scale wholesale and retail sector is considered an important source of business and employment opportunities for the local population. Therefore, many African governments have made it a reserved business sector. In Lesotho, foreigners can only operate in the sector if their business has a shop floor greater than 1,000 m<sup>2</sup>. In Ghana, foreigners must have an “initial capital stock of at least US\$500,000–US\$1,000,000” (Giese and Thiel 2012: 4). In Zambia, Malawi and Ethiopia, foreigners are totally barred from this sector. These restrictions are at least partly successful. In Lesotho, Basotho still own considerable numbers of wholesale and retail businesses: Of 2,518 companies in the 2010 Registrar of Companies, 313 were Chinese (MTICM 2010). In this way, the situation in Namibia is comparable – according to Dobler, the majority of trade there is, in fact, also not controlled by “migrant entrepreneurs” (Dobler 2009: 712). Nevertheless, migrants often operate successfully in restricted sectors and contribute substantially to it, even if they do not meet the legal requirements.

Against this backdrop, it is worth asking to what extent these legal restrictions are a reflection of either political or economic considerations. In Lesotho, the former rather than the latter seem to be more salient. From the

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2 For example, Haugen and Carling (2005: 650) argue that Chinese migrants in Cape Verde “mistrust Cape Verdeans as workers”. Dobler (2009: 725) observes that Chinese migrants “barely have any Namibian business contacts”.



perspective of Basotho entrepreneurs, smaller villages are not necessarily attractive places for opening businesses because of the difficulties and costs associated with long-distance supply chains, the small and infrequent customer base and the need to meet social obligations towards kin and other people in the village. For foreign migrants, smaller towns and villages are an attractive destination because the advantages of having fewer competitors outweigh the disadvantages of long-distance supply chains and a smaller customer base. Still, it is not economically viable for them to have large shops. Consequently, many enter illegally, but will still contribute to the local economy. This might also explain why some policy-makers were willing to turn a blind eye to illegal operations.

While it is widely recognised that the advent of Chinese and other migrants in African wholesale and retail sectors has resulted in an improved supply of goods, the creation of employment opportunities for the local population has been contested. The problem is of a qualitative rather than a quantitative nature. Chinese migrants are criticised for providing only limited skills-development opportunities for the local population. This was a recurring theme in Lesotho, but has also been pointed out by earlier studies on Chinese migrants in other African countries (Haugen and Carling 2005; Dobler 2009; Park 2009; Giese and Thiel 2012). In Lesotho, I was told that “yes, the Chinese create jobs for Basotho, but they do not provide any meaningful skills” (interview with MoL representative, February 2012). In other words, policy-makers had been hoping that the presence of Chinese migrants in the wholesale and retail sector would have spill-over effects that would in the long run boost the indigenous wholesale and retail sector and benefit the local population.

What is missing in the debate on skills creation in Lesotho and other African countries is the question of overall skill transfer in the wholesale and retail sector, and the overall employment opportunities structure. Generally speaking, there is not much difference between the skills transferred to Basotho in Basotho, Indian or Pakistani shops as compared to Chinese shops: In all cases, decisions are taken by the shop owner and ordinary employees are rarely in managerial positions. This is partly a reflection of distrust on the part of the Chinese and other foreigners, and partly a reflection of the fact that Basotho working in the wholesale and retail sector can be considered low-to-medium-qualified personnel. Since the majority of Basotho-owned small businesses appear to be “survivalists”, it seems that the potential for skills development of an employee in this sector is, independent of the nationality of the owner, limited.

Alternative employment opportunities for low-and-medium-qualified Basotho can be found in Lesotho’s textile and garment industry or by mi-

grating to South Africa. However, as is well documented, employees in textile and garment factories are assigned to low-skill and labour-intensive jobs (Gibbon 2003; Gibbs 2005; Rosenberg 2007). Likewise, for Basotho working on South African farms, there are limited skills-development opportunities. More importantly, despite the “menial” nature of the work, earnings in the wholesale and retail sector are higher. The minimum monthly wage in the sector was 1,107 LSL (approximately 108 USD) (MoL 2009: 20) in 2009, but less than 1,000 LSL (approximately 98 USD) for domestic and farm work in South Africa (Crush et al. 2010: 30), while untrained persons in the textile and garment industry earned around 763 LSL monthly (approximately 74 USD) (MoL 2009: 20).

The bleak outlook regarding earning and skills-development opportunities in Chinese-run wholesale and retail businesses suggests an asymmetrical exchange relationship between local employees and their Chinese employers. While asymmetry is part of every economic transaction or exchange relationship, a recurrent question in the debate on Chinese migrants in the wholesale and retail sector of African countries is whether the exchange relationships between local employee and Chinese employer are of a neo-colonial character. In the case of Lesotho, I identify several problems with framing the economic activities of Chinese migrants as a form of neocolonialism. The macro-level relationship between Lesotho and China lacks one key premise of neo-colonialism: an economic core–periphery structure. Lesotho's most important trading partner is South Africa, followed by Japan, the European Union and the United States (World Trade Organization 2013). China is not even among the top five. Consequently, China is not the powerful core that exports manufactured goods in return for cheap raw materials and labour from the periphery.

While this does not mean that the Chinese government has no economic and political leverage to further the interests of Chinese investors in Lesotho, it still seems that Chinese migrants operating in the wholesale and retail sector are not actively and directly supported by the government. Many of the Chinese migrants interviewed complained bitterly about being left to fend for themselves and having been exposed to corrupt immigration and labour inspectors. The failure of my attempts to interview a representative from the Chinese Economic and Commercial Counsellor's Office in Lesotho or the Chinese embassy were largely due to the fact that neither felt officially responsible for small-scale private investors.

Even from a micro-level perspective, the exchange relationship between Basotho and Chinese migrants cannot be described as neocolonial. The presence of Chinese migrants in the wholesale and retail sector did not result in the creation of a reservoir of cheap labour catering to the needs of

Chinese migrants and enabling them to make high profits by exploiting the local labour force. Chinese migrants pay the minimum wage. Unlike textile companies, they provide a working environment characterised by low occupational safety and health hazards. Furthermore, Basotho working for Chinese migrants are recruited on the regular job market and Basotho are not fully dependent on Chinese migrants for employment. More importantly, the survey combined with my follow-up discussions with Chinese migrants indicates that the economic benefits from coming to Lesotho are not staggeringly high.

## Conclusions

Chinese migrants have become a prominent feature across Africa. Although they have introduced cheap goods and created employment opportunities for the local population, their presence in African countries remains contested. This is mainly due to the perception that they are creating only menial jobs, operating illegally and have highly asymmetrical exchange relationships with local employees. The present article on Chinese migrants in Lesotho shows that this applies to some cases.

However, instead of taking such uniformity as a sign of Chinese exceptionalism or neocolonialism, I argue that the overall employment structure for unskilled and semi-skilled workers in the wholesale and retail sector is marked by few skills-development opportunities, irrespective of the nationality of the business owner. The problem of illegality is double-edged. On one hand, Chinese migrants operate in a restricted business sector. On the other, they have become a vital element of this sector and attempt to achieve legality by employing Basotho, paying at least the minimum wage, and applying for legal work permits. Finally, both the macro- and micro-level relationship between China and Lesotho lacks important key premises associated with neocolonialism.

This in turn implies that future research on Chinese migrants in Africa would benefit from placing the interplay of Chinese migrants, the presence of other foreign investors, and the larger structural constraints and opportunities in individual African countries at the centre of analysis.

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### **Am wirtschaftlichen Rand? Chinesische Migranten im Groß- und Einzelhandelssektor Lesothos**

**Zusammenfassung:** In diesem Beitrag werden die wirtschaftlichen Aktivitäten chinesischer Migranten im Groß- und Einzelhandel Lesothos in Beziehung zu den strukturellen Rahmenbedingungen gesetzt, und zwar mit Blick auf die allgemeine Debatte zur Rolle chinesischer Migranten in Afrika: Danach haben chinesische Migranten nur eine marginale Rolle in der lokalen Wirtschaft, man weist ihnen einen Ausnahmestatus zu und ihre Aktivitäten werden als neokolonialistisch interpretiert. Für Lesotho kann die Autorin demgegenüber zeigen, dass chinesische Migranten nicht am Rande der Ökonomie tätig, sondern zu einem wesentlichen Element im Groß- und Einzelhandelssektor aufgestiegen sind; zudem beruhen ihre wirtschaftlichen Aktivitäten nicht auf einem Ausnahmestatus und haben keinen neokolonialen Charakter, sondern stellen eine Reaktion auf die vorgefundenen strukturellen Rahmenbedingungen dar. Daraus schließt sie, dass die künftige Forschung davon profitieren würde, den Fokus stärker auf die Wechselwirkung von wirtschaftlichen Aktivitäten der chinesischen Migranten und strukturellen Rahmenbedingungen in den jeweiligen Staaten Afrikas zu richten.

**Schlagwörter:** Lesotho, Migranten, Chinesen, Großhandel, Einzelhandel