



COMMENTARY

Leaving on a strong passport: State protection of Chinese workers in Africa and beyond

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Funding information

H2020 European Research Council, Grant/Award Number: 802070

The Chinese 2017 action movie *Wolf Warrior II*, set in a fictional African country, is one of the highest-grossing films of all times. The film is thick with clichés about Africa, but also captures the scale and diversity of Chinese migration to the continent: Cameo appearances include Chinese shopkeepers, factory owners, medical practitioners and soldiers, and it hints at Chinese–African familial relations. An army fleet comes to the migrants' rescue when they are under threat by war and disease. The film wraps up with an image of a passport and the words “Citizens of the People's Republic of China: Don't give up in the face of danger overseas. Remember that a powerful motherland is behind you.”

Wolf Warrior II evokes a pivotal moment in the relationship between the Chinese state and labour migrants: The evacuation of more than 37,000 Chinese nationals from Libya and Egypt during the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011 (Zerba, 2014). Such evacuations were carried out with the explicit aim of enhancing patriotism and improving China's standing in the world (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016). Prior to the evacuations in North Africa, Chinese had complained in social media that their passport provided weak protection, especially compared to US passports. The evacuations were widely covered in Chinese media and improved public perceptions of the state's capacity to assist its citizens overseas (Chen et al., 2019).

The population of Chinese workers in Africa has increased in tandem with a growth in Chinese investments and contracts on the continent. It reached its peak at the end of 2015, when 263,700 workers were officially registered to be deployed in Africa (CARI, 2020). This number does not include the many Chinese business owners and entrepreneurs who have made their way to African countries on their own, or the numerous Chinese workers dispatched through informal labour agencies (Halegua & Ban, 2020). Fewer workers have travelled from China to Africa in recent years, and Chinese government sources put the number at 182,700 at the end of 2019 (CARI,

Commentary in section *Emerging China-Africa relations in the context of increasing mobility*.

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2020). The decline results from a sectoral and geographic reorientation of investments, rising Chinese salaries and tightened immigration policies in the destination countries.

Several concerns inform China's policy of protecting overseas citizens. First, the government's domestic legitimacy rests in part on its capacity to defend Chinese nationals abroad. Second, China's foreign rescue missions offer the opportunity to demonstrate China's strength as a major global power. Third, the People's Liberation Army gains operational experience abroad through the evacuation missions. Fourth, support for workers abroad helps sustain outward foreign investments and the export of goods and services. And finally, the activities of Chinese companies abroad are important for securing China's supply of energy and raw materials. The export of contract labour was part of state-led efforts to earn foreign currency when Chinese reform policies were introduced four decades ago. Today, it is intimately tied to the global expansion of Chinese capital and corporations (Nyiri, 2020). Until recently, upholding Chinese economic and political interests dovetailed nicely with the country's commitment to protect overseas citizens.

The 2020 Covid-19 outbreak tested China's willingness and capacity to protect citizens abroad. During the first two months of the pandemic, Chinese students and workers struggled to travel to destinations overseas after the Christmas and Lunar New Year breaks. The People's Republic of China condemned other countries' travel bans directed at Chinese citizens, and departing migrants sometimes received consular support to make it onto their destination countries (Haugen & Lehmann, 2020). After China gained control over the pandemic domestically, and infection rates in other countries mounted, many Chinese abroad tried to get back home. However, the government effectively closed China's borders in an effort to prevent infections via return migrants by refusing to grant commercial flights landing permits. Air traffic eventually resumed at a reduced level, and rigorous quarantine measures for people arriving from abroad were instituted. In the summer and fall of 2020, migrants reported that returning to China was difficult to arrange and could cost upwards of USD 10,000. China's urban-based middle- and upper-class accounted for a large group trapped abroad, and the perceived failure to protect their interest posed a domestic political challenge.

Internationally, China's economic and geopolitical interests were under threat due to international travel restrictions that stopped or delayed Chinese workers going abroad. Contracts and investment projects, including those under the auspice of the Belt and Road Initiative, commonly depend on dispatched managers and technicians. In June 2020, China gave emergency-use authorization for inoculating workers in state-owned companies with domestically developed Covid-19 vaccines, which had not yet gone through phase 3 trials, in order to facilitate the outflow of employees. The inoculations were given to workers prior to departure with the explicit aim of resuming overseas state-owned enterprise (SOE) projects (Global Times, 2020). China exerted diplomatic pressure on other countries for the unimpeded arrival of workers who tested positive for Covid-19 because they had been inoculated (The Guardian, 2020). The vaccination of workers who were still in China stretched the criteria for "emergency use", which is intended for situations where serious or life-threatening diseases may be prevented.

High infection rates in the destination countries and uncertainties associated with enrolling in a vaccine trial begs the question: Why were Chinese employees willing to go abroad under these circumstances? A decade of academic attention to Chinese workers abroad has yielded insights on this question. International labour migration from China has been governed through shifting forms of interplay between state power and intermediary agents, and subcontracting cascades often involve informal brokers and deception (Halegua & Ban, 2020; Xiang, 2012). Even before Covid-19, some workers left China with limited knowledge about what awaited them, and were cognizant of the possibility of injury and illness they risked when spending time abroad (Halegua & Ban, 2020: 91). Chinese who work for state-owned companies in Africa may hold university degrees in engineering or other fields, but have been unable to achieve the upward social mobility they hoped for within China. In African countries, they are at the frontier of Chinese capitalism, but their everyday experience may be marked by physical hardship, boredom or a state of waitthood and anticipation for something more fulfilling (Driessen, 2019; Lee, 2018; Schmitz, 2020). In short, going to Africa is seen as a sacrifice and unpredictability is assumed. While Covid-19 intensified risk and uncertainty, it did not radically change the circumstances under which Chinese labour goes abroad.

The aim of offering Chinese SOE employees vaccines was twofold: To protect the workers, and to generate data about the vaccine's efficacy (Global Times, 2020). By early September 2020, Sinovac Biotech declared that it had already injected 20,000 Chinese employees at Belt and Road Initiative with the vaccine (China Times, 2020). However, data from this roll-out have not made it into peer-reviewed publications, and more conventional research methods have been used to scientifically prove the vaccine's efficacy.

The vaccine did prove effective, and has safeguarded the health of SOE employees and reestablished confidence in China's commitment to protect citizens abroad. China's global expansion has not been slowed notably due to a shortage of migrant contract workers. Paradoxically, the proven biological efficacy and safety of the vaccine may in fact have made it less accessible to workers abroad. The vaccine is currently in short supply, and resourceful migrants, such as diplomats and self-funded students, currently scramble to be inoculated through a distribution system that is decentralized and favours the large coastal cities. SOE employees rely on the political influence of their employers to access the vaccine. Workers and business owners who travel to Africa without backing from an SOE and whose household registrations (*hukou*) are outside the prioritized hubs for vaccine distribution have little chance of getting inoculated. This generates new kinds of inequalities among Chinese migrants based on class differences and geographic origin.

Under Covid-19, the relationship between the state and Chinese citizens abroad has changed in ways yet to be fully apprehended. For example, the enrolment of labour migrants as volunteers into experimental medical treatments may generate discussions about the scientific sovereignty of receiving countries. More information about the diplomatic interactions (or lack thereof) between China and countries of destination during this phase of the vaccine trials may emerge once archival and interview-based research become less hampered by the global epidemic. Within China, the successful vaccine development and early roll-out among SOE contract workers abroad have strengthened expectations for citizen protection policies. For this to remain a political success story, however, the government must carefully balance the needs and claims of different migrant groups.

PEER REVIEW

The peer review history for this article is available at <https://publons.com/publon/10.1111/IMIG.12845>.

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How to cite this article: Haugen HØ. Leaving on a strong passport: State protection of Chinese workers in Africa and beyond. *Int Migr*. 2021;59:255–258. <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12845>