

Look east or look least? The Zimbabwean experience of Chinese economic investment in selected texts and examples

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Abstract

Imaginative writers capture the vicissitudes, vagaries, failures and successes of the society in which they are produced faster than historians do. A great deal of fictional works have been produced that analyse the causes, manifestations and effects of the Zimbabwean crisis on their politics. One side effect of the crisis which some artists have grappled with is the 'look East Policy' promulgated by Robert Mugabe in 2005. This was a policy shift necessitated by the break down in relations between Zimbabwe and most of the Western countries because of deficits in governance, human rights democracy and the inauguration of the politics of coercion. Due to the fact that the policy was foisted on Zimbabwe by circumstances leadership did not foresee, it was replete with abuses of labour laws, extraction of mineral resources, the flooding of cheap goods to the detriment of local industries and its people. In this research paper we argue that though there could have been positive spinoffs to the policy, writers who have so far analysed this policy see it as skewed in the sense that China seems to be benefiting more than Zimbabwe is. We argue that friendship with China is a form of latter day colonialism and was motivated less by national interests but more by the fact that Zimbabwe found herself in a cul de sac. To the extent that Zimbabwe was forced to look in one direction for political and economic succour, she was forced to look least among the community of nations that used to respect her. This is why there is talk in the country about reengaging the West. The research limits itself to the analysis of fictional works, which are still few, that narratives the reality of Chinese investment in Zimbabwe. We use No Violet Bulawayo's *We Need new Names*, Gappah's *An Elegy for Easterly*, Eppel's *White man Crawling* and his poem "Ghostly Galleon". We conclude that modern day foreign policy is never to look south, east, west or north but everywhere seeing that there are no permanent friends but interests. We argue that looking to China as the only giant international friend for Zimbabwe has economically diminished the country's options and this has become an albatross around the neck. There is need to revisit the so-called policy so that it is in the national interests.

Keywords: Look East Policy; Zhing-zhong; All-weather friend; Look Least ; Asian Giant; Sanctions

INTRODUCTION

The Context of the Revived Sino-Zimbabwe Relations

Zimbabwe's political, economic, social and ideological imbrolios have provided artists with raw materials with which to narrate the nation. The period from 1999 has seen accelerated literary production that contest, rehearse, question and legitimize policy decisions that

leaders of Zimbabwe have orchestrated. This is important in this context because Zimbabwe has witnessed an unprecedented economic, social and political turmoil occasioned by hit-and-miss political decisions that brought about what has come to be known as the Zimbabwean Crisis. This crisis saw the country's relations with the West taking a nose-dive over human

rights, governance and a host of democratic deficits. The result was a desperate search for alternative markets lines of credit and friendship in what President Robert Mugabe described in 2005 as the new Look East Policy (The African, 2005). In announcing, the decision to look for new friends, President Mugabe said:

“We have turned east where the sun rises, and given our backs on the West where it sets (Maroodza,2011:2).

Despite the linguistic sleight-of-hand, this signalled the reconstruction of an asymmetrical friendship with the rising economic Asian giant, China. Because of this friendship's implications on the lives of the people, on natural resources, on local markets, on the Chinese labour practices, Zimbabwean writers have naturally trained their analysis on the Chinese as 'all-weather' friends to Zimbabwe.

It is important to analyse the President's reasoning for turning east as captured in his 2005 statement quoted above. The policy statement (if it can be called that), is thin on content and thick on demagoguery and obscuring metaphoricisation. President Mugabe and his ZANU-PF's sun seemed to have set when they began insulting the West, violently seizing farms, abusing human rights, winning questionable elections and running the economy aground. China's sun as an economic giant may be rising phenomenally, but that does not mean that Zimbabwe can bask in the vicarious of another country seen as the newfound friend. Indeed China's fortunes are in direct contrast to that of Zimbabwe. The tendency to view international dealings, aid and investment opportunities in terms of binaries is akin to a lover who, spurned by a long time boyfriend, rushes to the next man's arms, not because she has feelings for him or him for her but to spite the previous lover into believing he has lost big time. Thus Zimbabwe turned to China because there appeared to be no possibility of a sunrise in the political careers of her leaders whose knee-jerk decisions at home were based on the politics of survival. China seemed to offer that window of opportunity economically and also as a discursive way of seeming to be in control of statecraft. The sanctions that had been imposed by the West as punishment for abuses and unconstitutionality left President Mugabe and his cohorts with no option but to find alternative sources of lines of credit to breathe life into an otherwise comatose economy. At this time there was a real possibility of regime change in Zimbabwe.

Before looking at the foundations of the SINO-Zimbabwe relations, it is important to state that a policy is of necessity, not a product of one individual waking up and declaring at a rally or funeral that the nation has decided to take a particular course. A policy involves a deliberate, conscious, consensual and cooperative effort by the country's decision-makers. National issues are too serious to be left to the whims of one individual to

declare preferences. Zimbabwe's foreign policy, like those of any other country, outlines its relations with other states. Such a policy is grounded on the country's domestic policy realities. These imperatives issue arguably from the need to razor wire the country's all-encompassing sovereignty and territorial integrity and, essentially, the protection of its image and prestige in the community of nations. Foreign policy objectives should not be based on the leaders' whims and king size egos but on improving the lives of the general populace of Zimbabwe. To seriously improve the lives of the people, according to Benoist (1999, p24-35) “a government (can only) be strong when it is legitimate” and driven by values of justice and reason. It is therefore arguable if the so-called Look East Policy was in fact such or was an attempt by the country's leaders to futilely spite the west for deigning to call Zimbabwe to account. It became easy to seek a friend who did not ask for democratic systems, ignored serious violations, and was driven by profit imperatives. The stance that China has taken towards the governance and politics of the countries in which it has invested has made it an ideal ally for Zimbabwe. China's closeness with Zimbabwe and other African states can be seen in the light of China's own murky human rights record (Taylor, 2004). China does not want its human rights record questioned just as Robert Mugabe hides behind the controversial principles of sovereignty and brooking no interference in order to ride roughshod over the citizens.

One may argue that in the main the Look East Policy is reductive and unnecessarily prescriptive and shows how Zimbabwe is still caught up in the bipolar world of Cold War politics instead of pragmatism. It can also be seen as an attempt to resuscitate the revolutionary discourse of the war era, dredging up a nationalist state that justifies the government heavy-handedness on its opponents. Obert Gutu in The New African (2010) argues that in today's world one should be wary of:

Continuing to look east without also looking West, North and South. At any rate, if you continue going east, you will inevitably come to the west because the East and the West are now two sides of the same coin.

If the Zimbabwean nationalist discourse is averse to colonialism or neo-colonialism in all its forms, if their resort to nativism is to find purchase, then mortgaging the nation to China needs some revision. Sadomba,(2011:225) sees the Look East Policy as a strategy by Mugabe to frame himself as a victim, thus ensuring that this block supported him in the U.N and other international organisations.

This essentially torpedoes the notion that this policy shift was volitional. Saungwene in the Newsday of 23 June 2014 scathingly put the whole thing into sharp relief when he stated that:

"The issue is the Chinese were never our friends and will never be, we are the ones who tried to befriend them but they don't see much economic benefits for investing in good relations with Zimbabwe."

The increasing questioning of Chinese partnership has, of late, been strident. The Daily News of 24 June 2014 carried the headline "*Chinese VP snubs Zimbabwe Again*" while the Zimbabwe Independent of 20 June 2014 screamed "*Zimbabwe must not sign away Mineral Wealth*." The Southern Eye Newspaper of 23 June 2014 reported that "*Minister (Mpofu) kicks out Chinese*" in the Victoria Falls airport upgrading.

Nevertheless the 'policy' has had its own intended and unintended consequences for the Zimbabwean leadership though so far few writers are charitable enough to admit as much. Most writers are fatigued by the discourse of patriotism that invariably sings eulogies for the ruling oligarchy whilst the majority sings dirges for their imperilled lives. However the 'policy' saw Zimbabwe establishing relations with Asia and because of that it managed to escape international isolation. In 2008, China and Russia vetoed a United Nations resolution by the UN Security Council, which intended to impose stiffer sanctions on Zimbabwe following allegations that the 2008 elections were marred by state-sponsored violence. This could have resulted in tightened travel ban and asset freeze on Zimbabwean officials (Chingono, 2010).

Zimbabwe buys manufactured products such as machinery, electrical items, engine and motor spares, plastics and many other commodities from China. Curiously, the trade relations are not different from the classical pattern of trade between the third world and developed world (Stiftung, 2004). The Zimbabwean market is being flooded with quantities of textiles, clothing and shoes from China sold at retail prices well below the prices of local commodities (Bloch 2004). While China is an important economic partner, its activities should be closely monitored and controlled.

Measures should be put in place to ensure that the cheap Chinese goods do not find their way easily into the local market. As the local industries are closing shop due to viability problems partly because of cheap commodities from Asia, Zimbabwe risks turning into a nation of merchants (Marongwe, 2004).

Economically the expectation is that China will replace Western donors and fill in the shoes left by the west in terms of resources that are no longer coming from the West. Such optimism possibly neglects the fact that unlike Western cooperation the Chinese approach does not come shrouded in moral principles and universal values, but is rooted on clear defined Chinese fundamental economic values which safeguard their survival as a people. Some workers at ZIMASCO, Kwekwe branch, lashed at the Chinese culture of investing less in the host country while safeguarding

financial accumulation for repatriation to China. One employee had this to say;

I wonder what kind of a country we will be in 5 to 10 years to come. These Chinese people are not permanent investors and history tells. They do not like financial reserves in a country of destination and if any are available, they are quick to export the money to China. In simple terms they are economic looters (The Weekly Gazette, 25 October 2013).

What pains the nation is that the core-periphery trade relations which led to the development of underdevelopment in Africa during the colonial period are the ones which Zimbabwe has forged with the Chinese. Against this introductory background, the research analyses the textual representations of Chinese investment presence in Zimbabwe. Though not many stories foreground this theme, we use No Violet Bulawayo(2013)'s *We Need New Names*, Petina Gappah(2009)'s short story "Mpandawana Dancing Champion" and John Eppel(2011)'s poem " Ghostly Galleon" in *Together* and "West of East" in *White Man Crawling*(2007). We argue that most of the writers who have written about Chinese presence are critical of their activities because they zhingzhong, fongkong and engage in some practices that do not add value to the nation. This is why the title of No Violet Bulawayo's book is *We Need New Names*; new ways of conducting foreign policy, new identities in the conduct of politics and economics.

Zhing-Zhonging the Nation in No Violet Bulawayo's "Country-Game" and Gappah's "Mpandawana Dancing Champion"

The story by No Violet Bulawayo uses the technique of child narration to foreground the absurdities and the barren policies of the ruling elite who represent the national father figures. Child narration is a technique that uses the voice of innocence that captures, though it cannot change, the realities of the adult world in Zimbabwe. It renders poignant a nation being plundered and pillaged by China that, more or less, is becoming a colonizing force in the country. The story brings to light the fact that the Chinese have flooded the construction industry in the country. Maroodza (2011:6) points as much when she observes that:

---at present approximately 30 Chinese companies are established in Zimbabwe with a marked presence in the construction sector.

This is what the child narrator captures when she notes that "Chinese men are all over the place in orange

uniforms, yellow helmets---the way they are running around you would think they are a field corn”(p42).What however comes across as ironic is that the Chinese men in the story are “in orange and yellow helmets” while the black men “are working in regular clothes-torn T-shirts, vests, shorts, trousers cut at the knees, overalls, flip-flops, tennis shoes”p42.The binary presentation of those with protective clothing and those without raises serious questions about the work ethos of the Chinese. The construction industry is a dangerous one and requires protective clothing for the workers. That the Chinese themselves have protective clothing and not others shows that they are flouting the labour laws of the country with impunity. This calls into question the claim that the Chinese are all-weather friends. Friendship is characterised by mutuality and win-win arrangements. The child narrator is questioning the role of the government in regulating the ways in which the Chinese companies should adhere to the labour practices of Zimbabwe. Is the government so desperate and powerless that the Chinese have, like previous colonialists, imported their labour practices in the country? This symbolises the fact that the Chinese are aware of the desperation of the Zimbabwean government's failure to provide employment to its citizens and are therefore out to fish in the troubled economic waters. More tellingly, this lack of concern for the Zimbabwean welfare can be analogized to their lack of concern for the Zimbabwe in general. In the brutal political violence that shook Zimbabwe from 2000 to 2009, China never raised its voice in the name of the ordinary Zimbabweans. Younde (2007:10) quotes Zhakata (2005) as saying that:

China publicly endorsed Operation Murambatsvina, a policy that bulldozed the homes of hundreds of thousands of people living in high-density suburbs.

This show of support amidst loud condemnations shows China's sagacity in pretending to be Zimbabwe's all-weather friend and therefore gaining concessions in Zimbabwe's mineral wealth. That the operation was targeting the urban poor who had voted with their feet for the opposition scaffolds the view that in its economic dealings with Zimbabwe, China is not concerned about global issues like democracy and human rights. This ousts the idea that the Look East policy was done in the interests of the generality of Zimbabweans. The children have this in mind when they shout to the Chinese that:

“...Leave our country and build wherever they (sic) come from---that they are not even our friends” (p47).

The above criticism of the Look East Policy is juxtaposed

to the statement by the Chinese man in Shanghai, when he meaningfully says to the children, “now you want made in China, you work, nothing free”p47).This becomes a metaphor of the relationship that characterises the Sino-Zimbabwe friendship. The Chinese are not concerned with sentimental appeals to historical friendship, but the profit imperative. Chinese, “economy is particularly in need of---raw materials to support its own growth and development of its own industries and infrastructure”(Maroodza,2011:7).Recently the Minister of Finance and Economic Development returned from China with his begging bowl empty. Characteristically the children seem to capture this meanness of the Chinese when they say “Let's just go, they are not giving us anything”p.47).This becomes metonymic of China's hesitancy in providing Zimbabwe with open lines of credit because they view the nation as a high risk.

China's pragmatism and solipsism is captured when God knows says “China is a red devil looking for people to eat so it can grow fat and strong”p47.Bastard frames it as a “beast.”The appellations that these children give bespeak of Chinese meanness, that in foreign affairs there are no permanent friends but permanent exploitation to assuage domestic interests. The child narrators are pointing to glaring anomalies in relations with China, which the leaders are incapable of because they are caught in a time warp. Colonial Britain was mean, exploitative and racist in the extreme. But, while the British colonised Zimbabwe, they also made it their home and therefore tried, in their racist colonial ways, to grow the economy. In many provinces, they had developed infrastructure, built hospitals, roads, schools, industry and created employment. On the other hand, the Chinese, like Paradise children in Budapest, seem on a mission to greedily wolf down everything within their reach. Thus, No Violet Bulawayo (2013:20) mockingly comments that:

The eastern countries like the former colonisers are on a mission to steal from the third world countries---, stealing not just a tiny piece but also a whole country.

The image of a “beast” used by God knows is therefore apt. A beast survives by eating other animals and is very uncouth in the conduct of its business. Thus while China is developing into one of the world's leading economies, Zimbabwe is careering uncontrollably in the opposite direction. The story also points to the forced eviction of Zimbabwean blacks to pave way for Chinese mining of diamonds. Soldiers forcibly remove the indigenes so that the Chinese can have unmolested mining rights. This explains why The Zimbabwe Independent cautioned against mortgaging the nation to the Chinese because China, being wary and foxy, does not want to extend unsecured credit to Zimbabwe. The government's

solution has been to surreptitiously sign away the country's mineral resources to the Asian giant (The Zimbabwe Independent, 20 June 2014).

Bulawayo cunningly and strategically uses the technique of juxtaposition in her analysis of Chinese presence in Zimbabwe. Having presented the Chinese in their meanness at their workplace, in Shanghai and through the child narrators to stigmatize them as ogres, she goes on to present the Paradise community being given food donations for adults and toys for children by representatives of western NGOs. It is the food that the government of Zimbabwe is unable to provide for its citizens despite the incredible capacity for invective directed at the west. Bulawayo seems to be suggesting that though the west is patronising, at least they are philanthropic. China is not shown doing that but taking advantage of the situation to exploit both human and natural resources. In fact, they point out that there is nothing for free. Rhetorically the writer is making a case against pigeonholing foreign policy direction to only one direction.

The Chinese- constructed infrastructure has also shown amazing lack of durability. The National Sports stadium had to be renovated after dangerous cracks appeared that could have endangered the soccer loving fans. The Msavezi Bridge near Chachacha, built by the Chinese, was in 2013 washed away by the floods that resulted in the ZUPCO bus being swept away with the passengers aboard. The stretch of the road in Mandamabwe turn-off in the direction of Gweru shows shoddy workmanship. The road is so bumpy it cannot pass for a tarmac road and is given to potholing in the shortest possible time. Certain bridges and roads constructed way back by the British colonialists still stand as beacons of efficient and enduring workmanship. Maybe the problem really lies with the Zimbabwean administration who gives these Chinese the carte blanche and fail in the important duty of monitoring and evaluation in futile belief that a friend cannot give one the wrong end of the stick. Eppel (2007:51) talks about the Chinese's insatiable appetite for "sex and money." This finds expression in the story "Country-Game" where the Chinese foreman emerges from the big tent with two Zimbabwean women. That he is busy buckling his belt signifies that he was having sex with both of them. In patriarchal societies, the phallus is a symbol of control and domination, of piercing holes in Mother Zimbabwe since it is framed as female. The Chinese are therefore having a good time exploiting both the natural and human resources of Zimbabwe.

On Independence Day, April 2014, Robert Mugabe accused the Chinese of flooding the country with cheap labour (Newsday, 23 June 2014). The President was bemoaning that in most cases the Chinese brought their own personnel from China. The irony is that investment is supposed to create employment for the locals and if labour is brought from elsewhere, then it ceases to have

any logic. China is a populous country where the pressure is eased if some of its citizens are offloaded to other countries. Zimbabwe becomes a dumping site of elements deemed excess in their own country. In instances where the labour force is local, the pay is low, the working hours long. No Violet Bulawayo (2013) is at pains to paint this sordidness when she creates a black labour force that is so wretched that the children wonder why they do not behave like other dignified adults at their workplace. The children have also been sent to pass a message to Moshe who was working for the Chinese but is said to have left for South Africa. The writer here seems to be insinuating that those who have the methods simply escape to foreign lands rather than be used by the Chinese. Recently in the Zimbabwean newspapers, the Chinese made headlines for abusing the Zimbabweans by beating them up as punishment. Whites normally did this practice during colonial Rhodesia. Gappah's "Mpandawana Dancing Champion" reflects the extent to which Zimbabwe has become a dumping site for Chinese products that do not add value to the nation. For MdharaVitalis, Chinese products are a fraud. MdharaVitalis says, "I made furniture from oak, teak, mahogany, and cedar ash chaiyo----not these zhing-zhong products from China. They may look nice and flashy but they will crack in a minute" (p115). In a way, the narrator is saying the Zimbabwean economy has become zhing-zhong through association with China. One cannot but fail to detect the implicit comparison with the period before the Look East Policy. MdharaVitalis puts this into sharp relief when he points out that the chairs that he used to make are used by the President. But this again raises the issue of why the leaders themselves do not use the brittle Chinese products but expect the ordinary person to be happy about them. Darling captures her disdain for such Chinese products when she says of them:

Last time they gave us a black plastic bag full of things-watches, jewellery, flip-flops, batteries-but like those shoes mother bought me once, the items were cheap kaka and lasted us only a few days (No Violet Bulawayo, 2013:46).

This should not be misconstrued to mean that China manufactures only fake products because they do business with other western countries which Robert Mugabe described as where the sun sets, but that Zimbabwe as a market destination is deemed equivalent to those types of products.

Thus, the bane of Zimbabwe today is that she has been forced to look east and therefore look least because, with money in short supply the economy not functioning well, the ordinary person is forced to buy products that do not last, forcing him/her to buy the same thing within a short space of time. Bobo wryly and cynically concludes that:

“The country (is) becoming Zhim-Zhim-Zimbabwe because the ruling party has sold the country to the Chinese” (Gappah, 2009:115).

The statement shows the element of disappointment over Chinese investment in Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe is considered a pariah state by most western countries who accuse it of maintaining its grip on the populace through force. For this reason, most of these governments have embargoed it from receiving arms until democracy has been achieved. China's appetite for raw materials makes her sidestep issues to do with violence and human rights. It is on this basis that China's relationship with Zimbabwe is also based on military cooperation where China supplies the country with arms. Often these arms are used to suppress dissent and to cow the citizens into submission. John Eppel's (2011:51) poem “Ghostly Galleon” captures this military cooperation despite Zimbabwe's avowed propensity for violence. The persona talks about the An Yue Jiang looking to supply arms to Zimbabwe. The persona says:

There is a ghostly galleon
That plies the southern seas;
It carries death for working folk:
Canons and RPGS.

Proper friendship dictates that one gives counsel to the friend in terms of behaviour and nation-building. If China could sell Zimbabwe arms even though she has no external provocation, whatever Zimbabwe uses the arms for is not their business. This encourages dictatorship, gross violation of rights, megalomania and a culture of silence. The significance of the poem is in that during the period of biting economic crisis when food was scarce, inflation rampant and the politics characterised by adversarialism and violence, China decided to sell arms to Zimbabwe seemingly to be used against her own people. The Chinese ship tried to dock in Durban to disgorge its lethal contents. The workers refused to offload it suspecting sinister intent. The persona therefore indicts China for being complicit in the subversion of the popular will in Zimbabwe.

CONCLUSION

In light of the foregoing, the government's Look East Policy is problematic. Though it possibly has its own positive spin-offs for the country, the reality on the ground, from the ordinary person's perspective, points otherwise. This is to be expected given the fact that it was a hastily conjured up, reactive and fundamentally desperate move in response to the acrimony with western countries over rule of law, democracy and violence. It is even arguable that, at the time it was announced (2003), it could have been called a policy,

and not a statement in the mould of telling the west to go to hell. Zimbabwean writers chosen for this research see it as spelling disaster. Not only does China seek to exploit the country's resources for her own industries, that country tends to suffocate the local industry with cheap, substandard goods that do not add value to the nation. In the construction industry, not only is the personnel often imported from their country, but, where it is local the workers are abused and the labour laws flagrantly flouted. The workmanship is poor in the construction of infrastructure like roads, stadia and bridges. This is why the word zhing-zhong has become a word of abuse and derogation.

In a globalised world, where there are common norms and standards that nations need to adhere to such as democracy, freedom, human rights, probity and rule of law, China's investment policies have not been helpful in that direction. Besides, China's sale of arms to Zimbabwe has helped prop up tyrannical tendencies in the country because she does not care what happens in that country so long as they (Chinese) harvest profits. This has given rise to the perception that Zimbabwe has been mortgaged to China as the new colonialists. Zimbabwe is the one that engages in megaphone declarations of putative friendship with China whilst the latter is pragmatic and profit-driven. Dredging up ideological pasts' counts for nothing in a world driven by national and economic interests and not sentimental Cold War politics. Thus to the extent that the Look East Policy confines Zimbabwe to look in one direction, to the extent that Zimbabwe has remained in the doldrums since her fallout with the west, the Look East Policy, as shown by the selected artists, is indeed a look least policy in the eyes of the generality of Zimbabweans. Chinese economic investment has failed to bail Zimbabwe out of the economic doldrums as shown by company closure, the liquidity crunch, high rate of unemployment and the continued haemorrhaging economy.

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