

Research Project of the Research Team 1 of FSP 3:

West African Traders as Translators Between Chinese and African Urban Modernities

In the first phase of our [research project](#) we established that in contrast to over-exaggerating local discourses the direct impact of the resident Chinese economic actors on local economic practices and social institutions in urban West Africa lags behind what we anticipated, although Chinese economic activities are indirectly opening up new opportunities for a wide range of local actors. Not resident Chinese but local African actors seem to play decisive roles in the creation of powerful imaginations of things Chinese and China. Through the transnational economic practices of sharply growing numbers of diverse traveling African traders, China has become increasingly attractive as an alternative point of reference for the continuing negotiation of the urban Senegalese and urban Ghanaian versions of multiple modernities that once had been almost exclusively framed with reference to North American and Western European models.

Our findings strongly suggest that West African traveling traders possess innovative capacities as entrepreneurs and agents of an economic globalization from below. They play important roles in societal processes of negotiation and re-ordering within the frameworks of distinct Ghanaian and Senegalese urban modernities when they translate material objects and immaterial concepts between China and West Africa which accompany them as traveling ideas alongside with the goods made in China that they import for local consumption. Hence our main interest in this second phase of research is the study of creatively appropriated and re-signified objects and concepts that West African traders introduce to their home societies as products of their transnational and local material and discursive practices of translation.

Because we understand translation as a process of selection of specific objects and/or concepts, along with their interpretation, distortion and creative re-signification, we assume that translational products are strongly impacted by specific "translation regimes" that are constituted by – among other things – the African translator's social positioning, membership in networks, and belief systems, on one side, and specific constellations of actors facilitating/constraining particular modes of interaction with China and the Chinese, on the other side. As we are particularly interested in the transformations of selected material objects and immaterial concepts from the Chinese "original" to the translational product, we follow a multi-sited and mobile ethnography approach. A specific set of qualitative methods will be employed in order to explore the processes of translation and dissemination of translation products. Our ultimate goal is to try to assess the current and potential impact of these processes and relevant products of transnational translation on social change and (re-)ordering in the context of the distinct urban modernities of Ghana and Senegal.

Publications:

- Giese, Karsten: Same-Same But Different: Chinese Traders' Perspectives on African Labor, in: China Journal, 69 (January 2013), 134-53 ([online version](#))
- Giese, Karsten/Thiel, Alena: The vulnerable other - distorted equity in Chinese-Ghanaian employment relations, in: Ethnic and Racial Studies, 2012, DOI: 10.1080/01419870.2012.681676 ([Early View](#))
- Giese, Karsten/Thiel, Alena: When Voicelessness Meets Speechlessness – Struggling for Equity in Chinese-Ghanaian Employment Relations, GIGA Working Paper No 194, May 2012, Hamburg ([Abstract & full article](#))
- Marfaing, Laurence/Thiel, Alena: Chinese Commodity Imports in Ghana and Senegal: Demystifying Chinese Business Strength in Urban West Africa, GIGA Working Paper No 180, November 2011 ([Abstract & full article](#))

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