



New Asian song : « I have a farm in Africa »*

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Some news that made headlines last week struck a personal chord for me. I was born in a small town on Madagascar Island, off the East coast of Africa, years before the island regained its independence. Now I read that the South Korean firm Daewoo Logistics secured 1,3 million hectares (that is close to 2,500,000 acres) of farmland in Madagascar, about half the size of Belgium. The contract with Madagascan government will last 99 years, apparently at no cost to the Korean company. The idea is to produce maize and palm oil, which will be shipped back to Korea. A senior manager from the company told the Financial Times of London that they intend to develop arable land for farming over the next 15 years « using labour from South Africa ». My fellow Madagascans will be thrilled...

Al-Qudra Holding, an investment company based in Abu Dhabi, said in August it planned to buy 400,000 hectares of arable land in African and Asian countries by the end of the first quarter of 2009. The Ethiopian prime minister recently announced that his country was « very eager » to provide hundreds of thousands of hectares of agricultural land to Middle Eastern countries.

This year the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organisation also warned that the race by some countries to secure overseas farmland risked creating a « neo-colonial » system. Is that so ?

In 1963, Chinese Prime Minister Zhou Enlai visited Ghana, Guinea, Mali, Ethiopia, Sudan and Somalia. « *Long time no see...* » his hosts could have said. Last time the Chinese came along it was by sending imperial fleet to Africa, five times between 1418 and 1433. In 2007, President Hu Jintao hosted 48 African Heads of State in Beijing. Trade deals that came out of this gathering reached almost \$2 billion.

China is now back in Africa mainly for commodities. Oil mainly, but for all kinds of minerals and some farming too. Small Chinese businesses have been a common sight in Africa for decades. With this new trend, Chinese communities develop quickly in Africa, and frictions arise. In 2006, the opposition candidate in the Presidential election in Zambia ran on an explicitly xenophobic anti-Chinese ticket.

South Korea is the fourth importer of maize worldwide. China is only barely self sufficient in food resources and the balance of its agriculture will be toppled by the looming increase in meat consumption. Agitated by intense speculation, prices for commodities such as wheat and rice have skyrocketed this year before tumbling down, for now. The shock wave hit all countries in need of commodities imports. Those who can pay try to secure their supplies. Now poor emerging countries are surrendering their land and minerals to “rich” emerging countries. This is the new shape of things to come.

*A bit of misinformation here, I must confess. « I had a farm in Africa » is a famous quote from « Out of Africa » the autobiographical book written by Danish author Karen Blixen in 1937. In 1985, the movie « Out of Africa », was directed by Sydney Pollack, with Meryl Streep and Robert Redford. I don't know if there is any song by that title in Korea or China today.

Those of you who are more interested in the new position of China in Africa should read *La Chineafrique, Pékin à la conquête du continent noir*, a book written by Serge Michel et Michel Beuret (Grasset, 2008).

