

Crossing Seas

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Sarah Hanisch

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Women's Mobile Lives in China and Lesotho

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Introduction

After breakfast on February 13, 2014, I went to the taxi rank in downtown Bloemfontein, a place I had become familiar with over the years. At the ticket office in the faraway corner, I provided my name, passport number, and phone number, and then I bought two tickets (one for me and one for my luggage) for a minibus ‘taxi’ (the cheapest form of public transportation) to Maseru, Lesotho. Since I was too late to catch an early taxi and too early for the busy afternoon traffic, I had to wait for more than two hours for the taxi to fill up. When it finally did, our driver’s helper hurriedly ordered the passengers to occupy their seats, to stow their luggage away, and to fasten their seatbelts. Basotho rap music was turned up, and our taxi pulled out of the taxi rank. We were soon on the N8 highway headed towards Maseru, with sprawling fields occasionally interrupted by settlements and small farms on either side of us and earthen colours accentuating the blue sky. After Botshabelo and Thaba Nchu, the irregular outline of the Maluti Mountains became visible, and I knew that we would arrive at the border within the next hour.

Our taxi crossed the railway track at the border post and parked at the provisional taxi rank. The driver greeted his acquaintances and everyone else got off and walked towards the border checkpoint, which consisted of flat-roofed single-storey containers and houses. South African border guards checked the private vehicles that drove through, whereas those who arrived by taxi had to cross the border on foot. If you were unlucky—as I was on that day—you had to wait for a long time in the pedestrian queue while the border guards took extended lunch breaks. The checkpoints for vehicles and their passengers remained open but I could not use these, even though the procedures were exactly the same. Once I had my exit stamp in my passport, I walked out of the small building and along the bridge that crossed the Caledon River, which marks the official border between South Africa and Lesotho. Just around the corner was the Lesotho border post, where I signed in the visitor’s book and obtained a 14-day permit.

The border post was close to Maseru’s industrial area, which in colloquial Sesotho is commonly referred to as Stationeng. The name derives from the country’s only railway station that is in this area. The station was opened in 1905 and for many decades was one of the key modes of transport for Basotho who worked in the

South African mines (Mensah and Naidoo 2011). Migrant workers also travelled by foot, or by taxi after the introduction of minibus public transport in the 1930s. Passenger transport from Maseru train station stopped in the 1980s. Around this time, Taiwanese migrants—as well as a few migrants from Mainland China—started to arrive in Lesotho by plane. For many of the early Mainland Chinese migrants, Lesotho was a transit stop on their way to South Africa. Back then, the borders with South Africa were even more porous than they are today and those who had failed to obtain a visa often crossed into the country over the veld or the Maluti Mountains—on foot, on donkey back, or in the boot of someone's car.

My Chinese interlocutors—who originated from Fuqing, a county-level city in Fujian Province—came to Lesotho more than two decades later than those early Chinese migrants. They usually took the Hong Kong–Johannesburg–Maseru connection from airports in Beijing or Shanghai because there were no direct flights between China and Lesotho. South Africa was a transit stop in the literal sense. Unlike European citizens like myself, my interlocutors could not get a 90-day temporary permit upon arrival in South Africa but could only get a transit visa. Even if they could have chosen to arrive in Maseru differently, most of my interlocutors would have never travelled on public transport. They felt that it was unreliable and far too dangerous because they would be easy prey for criminals. Though they were adamant that I should also not use public transport, they added that, at least in Lesotho, I was less likely to be robbed because Basotho ‘would respect white people’ (*zongzhong bairen*) (Wu Xi,¹ 41 years old, Mohale's Hoek, March 15, 2014)—placing us in very different positions in Lesotho, as I discuss below.

Although my interlocutors considered China to be safer than Lesotho, they immediately warned me about potential dangers in China—not only for a female foreigner like myself, but also for ordinary Chinese people. Li Yan, a 28-year-old woman whom I met in Maseru, told me that there were a lot of imposters (*pianzi*) and pickpockets (*xiaotou*) and that one had to be careful (*xiaoxin*). Chen Jun, a 35-year-old woman whom I met in Mohale's Hoek, told me that she always felt uneasy when travelling in China because local people (*bendiren*) were quick to spot an outsider (*waidiren*) and take advantage of them. They sold overpriced tickets, tours, and hotel rooms. Some taxi drivers used rigged taxi meters which increased the fee astronomically. I was also advised to not take out a short-term lease for an apartment at Fuqing's old city centre because these were usually poorly equipped and rented out to migrant workers from all over China. As Chen Xi, one of my key interlocutors, told me, ‘It's not safe because all sorts of people live there’ (Chen Xi, 19 years old, Mohale's Hoek, September 4, 2014).

With this advice, I travelled to China in July 2015 to do fieldwork in Fuqing. I landed in Xiamen on July 1, 2015. The next day, I took a bus to Xiamen railway station. At the entrance I was surprised to see a long queue and heavily armed

1. All my informants' names have been changed.

security guards who were checking tickets, passports, and luggage. When I first came to China in 2005, there were few armed security guards at the railway stations; people could buy tickets without their passports, and could enter and exit the railway station by simply buying a platform ticket for a few RMB. The new measures were supposed to increase security, but to me it felt like one insecurity had been traded for another. Unlike my first stays in China, where everyone advised me to look after my belongings, I was not afraid of having anything stolen. At the same time, I felt that the new security guards and cameras were an uncomfortable reminder that not only potential criminals but also myself and all the perfectly normal people around me (women with their children, migrant workers, business people) were under constant surveillance.

After the ticket check, I got onto platform 2 and proceeded to cart 40. Without a minute's delay, our train left Xiamen railway station and we sped past paddy fields, villages, and towns. We soon arrived at Fuqing railway station. I left the cool, air-conditioned train and stepped onto the platform into the humid summer heat. To my left was the rear side of the main building, and to my right were green mountains. Once outside the railway station, I found myself standing in a large empty square—a buffer zone connecting the drop-off area with the station's main building. From afar, the building's dark-blue glass front and grey semi-rounded frame resembled a giant pair of ski goggles, a modern architectural style reminiscent of Shanghai's and Beijing's railway stations.

This modern building, however, concealed how recent Fuqing's connection to rail services was. As I learned during my stay, Fuqing did not have a railway station until 2010—in part, because the city, like many counties along Fujian's coast, was geographically too close to Taiwan and the government feared that potential attackers from the island could take advantage of railway stations. Throughout the Mao era (1949–1976), and even for much of the post-Mao era, the focus was on connecting the provincial capital Fuzhou and the harbour city Xiamen to China's vast railway network. The decision to connect Fuqing to this network in 2010 was, perhaps ironically, related to the same reason it had remained disconnected for so long: Taiwan. In the mid-2000s, Fujian Province became part of the Western Taiwan Straits Economic Zone and later part of the Belt and Road Initiative (Fuqing Overseas Chinese Newspaper 2017). Fuqing is in a strategic intermediate location in this zone—close to Fuzhou, the provincial capital, but also close to Pingtan, a peninsula on the tip of the coast, which has direct ferry connections to Taiwan. The new high-speed railway was part of a larger investment package from the provincial government, giving a boost to the new economic zone as well as to Fuqing's economy.

The two scenes described above point to the very different historical trajectories and everyday realities of Lesotho and Fuqing, but also to surprising details that complicate the narrative of the present-day asymmetric relationship between African countries and China. For instance, Lesotho—a small, landlocked, and

impoverished African country—already had a railway station in 1905, while Fuqing—a city whose inhabitants often claim that they are so much more advanced than Lesotho—had to wait another 105 years to receive one. As I explained above, although China is generally considered to be safer than Lesotho, my interlocutors and I faced security concerns in both countries. Such details suggest that a closer look at the histories and contexts of the places in which Chinese-African interactions take place may reveal factors which do not fit into established narratives of China-Africa relations.

Throughout this book, I will underline the importance of local histories and contexts for understanding the contemporary experiences of Chinese migrants in Africa. In recent discussions on Chinese migration to Africa there has been a tendency to equate local Chinese contexts and histories with China's national policies and history. Foreign policies such as the 'going out' strategy or the Belt and Road Initiative (Summers 2016) are often taken as the backdrop against which China-Africa interactions unfold. This has meant that discussions have focused on China's national interests and on often-used economic and international relations theories (Sautman and Yan 2007; Mung 2008; Bräutigam 2009). A more historical strand of literature has examined how ideas of self-reliance and Third World solidarity shaped China's interaction with Africa (Monson 2009; Strauss 2009; Strauss 2013). Recent works have highlighted the importance of China's reform and opening policies (Driessen 2019). In this book, I will emphasise the importance of understanding local contexts within China, which I argue can be better grasped by looking into how bigger state projects and national history played out at the local level, and by paying attention to the concepts our interlocutors use to describe their experiences of these. In doing so, the book adds to earlier works on Chinese migrants in Africa which have provided elaborate details on the economic activities of Chinese migrants (Dobler 2009; Park and Chen 2009; Huynh, Park and Chen 2010; Turner 2010; Lee 2017; Ndjio 2017; Driessen 2019), on their relations with Africans (Lee 2009; Giese and Thiel 2012; Chappatte 2014; Y. Liu 2017; Zi 2017) and on the broader geopolitical implications of Chinese migration to Africa (Dittgen 2017; Siu and McGovern 2017).

Locating Fuqingese Women

Over the past six years, I have been closely following a group of ten women from Fuqing. These women were born between 1973 and 1995 and represent three different cohorts of rural Chinese migrants: those born in the late Mao era, in the first reform decade, and in the second reform decade. With a few exceptions, most came from large families who struggled to make ends meet. The older cohort had received only basic schooling, while the younger cohorts had attended high school. Most of the women had initially migrated from their rural homes to the urban centre of Fuqing. After struggling in the city for a few years, some women left for Lesotho,

while others stayed in Fuqing. *Searching for Sweetness* aims to draw attention to the connections between internal and international migration by investigating both overseas migration and rural-to-urban migration within Fuqing, a county-level city. County-level cities are an administrative invention of the post-Mao era and an important but understudied site of migration. In these cities, geographical proximity and rural migrants' familiarity with their destination shape migratory identities and projects which have been overlooked by previous studies.² In exploring these new identities and projects, I highlight the fluidity of analytical categories such as rural/urban and internal/international and how they gain new meanings as these migrant women move between different sites in China and Africa.

The multi-sitedness of their migration journeys places the Fuqingese women at the intersection of studies on internal and international Chinese migration (Pieke and Mallee 1999). From the perspective of internal migration, the Fuqingese women belong to the generation of women from rural and semi-rural areas who migrated to the 'city' in search of better opportunities (Zhang 2001; Murphy 2002; Lou 2004; Jacka 2005; Shen 2016; Zavoretti 2017). While the state generally places such rural migrants into the abstract 'floating population' (Zhang 2001, 23), the Fuqingese women cannot be moulded into this category. Unlike other rural migrants, the women did not travel to distant megacities. They were content with 'migrating', sometimes only a few kilometres, to the 'urban' centre of Fuqing. The short distance between the city and their rural home villages and towns meant that they were often firmly integrated in wider family projects. At the same time, they could also pursue individual projects at the county seat: they bought houses, established their families, and engaged in a wide range of business and employment activities. While they were not official urban residents—that is, they did not possess an urban *hukou*,³ they did not face the same discrimination and disadvantages that rural migrants in cities like Beijing and Shanghai faced. This in turn meant that they were much more selective with the kind of struggles they were prepared to take up.

The journeys of the Fuqingese women in Lesotho often started with migration to the nearby county seat. However, at the suggestion of relatives and friends, they decided that financial prospects in Lesotho were more promising than those at home. The women were very different from earlier overseas Chinese migrants. They were part of a new generation of Chinese migrants to African countries. Mung (2008, 95) distinguished between 'temporary migrants, entrepreneurial migrants and migrants in transit'. At first sight, the Fuqingese women seem to be either temporary migrants or entrepreneurial migrants. Chinese entrepreneurial migrants in Africa are portrayed as being driven by higher earnings and easy access to business opportunities (Mung 2008, 100). More important, they appear flexible when it comes to the place and duration of their stay (Haugen and Carling 2006, 647). Chinese migrants in Africa are also described as those who have 'been pushed to

2. An exception is Andrew Kipnis's study in Shandong (2016).

3. For an overview of the *hukou* system, see Cheng and Selden (1994).

Africa' (Driessen 2016). However, a closer look at the women's stories presents a more complex picture than that suggested by such overarching theories. First, most of them were not flexible and mobile. Second, the Fuqingese women were partially motivated by the potential of higher earnings in Lesotho but did not feel that they were pushed to Lesotho. Third, as I show in subsequent chapters, there were significant generational differences in the women's reasons for migrating, the duration of their stay, and the way they organised their lives in Lesotho.

Labels such as rural/urban and internal/international are therefore difficult to apply to the Fuqingese women, who also did not use these labels themselves. The women—both in Fuqing and in Lesotho—often referred to themselves as *pingmin*, which translates to 'a normal urban citizen, a public citizen. They are free people who have no special power or public office. In ancient times, *pingmin* referred to an average virtuous person. Later, the term referred to ordinary people' (Baidu Baike 2017). The word *pingmin* is widely used in everyday conversations, but it was neither an official category in the Maoist class system (Brown 2015), nor is it one in the post-Mao system of social stratification.⁴ Only Chinese scholars such as Liang Xiaosheng have taken *pingmin* as a separate social class. Liang argued that society in the post-Mao era is delineated as follows: 'capitalists, compradors, the new middle class, intellectuals, ordinary citizens (*pingmin*) and the urban poor, peasants and secret societies' (Anagnost 2008, 503).

Ordinary people are different from the middle class (Goodman 2016; Li 2010), which in China is sometimes conflated with the idea of average citizens. The new middle class has been officially portrayed as a 'stabilizing force in society' (Anagnost 2008, 498), but many have pointed to its 'amorphous, disjointed, and unstable nature' (L. Zhang 2012, 3). It consists of urban, highly educated professionals (He 2006, 71) and represents only 'a small proportion of the Chinese population' (Goodman 2016, 4). Most of the population remains officially categorised as 'rural' in the household registration system (Zhang and Li 2016, 893). These demographic trends can also be seen in Fuqing. In 1990 Fuqing became a county-level city (Xu 2002, 34), but official urban registered households remained a minority. Official statistics from 2016 showed that among Fuqing's population of 1.35 million, only 318,244 people had an urban *hukou* (Fuzhou City Fuqing City People's Government, 2016). The majority were still registered at the town and village level and had a rural *hukou*. The state might officially cast the middle class as the new 'stabilizing force of society' (Anagnost 2008, 498). However, the real stabilizing force in Fuqing consists of ordinary citizens with a rural *hukou*—such as the Fuqingese women I discuss.

4. With the economic reform, class has been replaced with social strata (Anagnost 2008, 500) for two main reasons: first, because the Mao class system could no longer represent the social and economic 'realities' of the post-Mao era; and second, because class and class struggle were inherently tied together (Anagnost 2009, 503), and the latter was given up in the post-Mao era.

The old city centre was also just a few bus stops away from Yinxi, the new city centre across the Wulong River, where Chen Fei had her shop. Chen Fei had moved to the city at the age of 17. After many business failures, she was now running a successful shop with her husband and other Fuqingese women, including Chen Feng and Chen Zhu, who would also become some of my key interlocutors. Chen Feng was the same age as Chen Fei. She came from a well-off family in Fuqing but had traded the supposed comfort of being a stay-at-home mom for the challenges of being a businesswoman. Chen Zhu was just 26 years old. She had been lured to Indonesia by an ‘uncle’ who organised a job for her as a bar girl, instead of the ‘office job’ she had been promised. In the end, she managed to return to Fuqing, but the experience tainted her wish to migrate. These women all added important perspectives on what it meant to grow up in Fuqing, and to stay there. Without the (bitterness) stories of women who stayed in Fuqing, it would not have been possible for me to rethink the (bitterness) stories I heard of Fuqingese women in Lesotho.

Since I also wanted to understand the situation in the more rural parts of Fuqing—where many of my interlocutors came from—I travelled extensively outside the urban centre, with the help of two friends of a Fuqingese businessman I had met in Lesotho. Mr Zhang was a teacher at a local primary school. I went with him to visit his in-laws at the southernmost tip of Fuqing, to explore the mountain villages around Dongzhang, and to visit Fuqing’s economic zones. Mr Dong was a self-employed pharmaceutical salesman with clients across Fuqing. I accompanied him on his delivery tours, to his home village in Haikou, and to his friends in Longtian. Through these visits, I discovered different parts of Fuqing and was able to better understand why Fuqing could be rural, urban, rich, and poor all at the same time. Even though I did not have the opportunity to conduct extensive field research in Fuqing, my time there felt very intense and multilayered. In gaining an understanding of the perspectives of those who had stayed or returned, I could achieve what I had initially deemed impossible. I could tell a detailed story of Chinese migration to Lesotho which linked this migration to local developments in China, without having to write two separate stories.

Organisation of the Book

This book is divided into three parts. The first part (Chapters 2 and 3) focuses on my informants’ experiences in China. Chapter 2 discusses the childhood memories of three cohorts of Fuqingese women who used ‘bitterness’ and ‘sweetness’ as discursive concepts to make sense of their early experiences of internal migration and of the Chinese state’s modernity project. Chapter 3 expands the focus on internal Chinese migration by investigating the women’s experiences of ‘struggle’ (*fendou*) in the city, as well as the links between individual and family projects, social mobility, and rural-to-urban migration within Fuqing.

The second part of the book (Chapters 4 and 5) discusses my interlocutors' experiences in Lesotho. Chapter 4 analyses how the Fuqingese women constructed their migratory selves in Lesotho in relation to the unique history of white traders in the country and the Fuqingese pioneer migrants who took over from these traders in the late 1990s. Chapter 5 investigates the impact of the violent political riots which took place in Lesotho in 1998. I argue that these riots marked a turning point in how the postcolonial state engaged with small-scale entrepreneurs such as Chinese migrants and the localities they operated in. I analyse how this influenced the Fuqingese women's search for sweetness, and particularly how it led to younger migrants forming a very different perspective of prospects in Lesotho to that of older migrants.

The third and final part provides an update on my interlocutors and offers a conclusion. Chapter 6 provides a closer look at how some of the women reflected on their past choices, and on where their searches for sweetness had taken them by 2018. I discuss how their varied experiences and perspectives relate to China's nation-building project and to major societal shifts in the country in the past few decades. Chapter 7 charts the main conceptual themes addressed in the book, including earlier discussions on Chinese modernity, the role of women, and the Chinese state. These discussions are relevant to understanding Chinese migrant women in Lesotho and in Fuqing, their sense of self, and their search for sweetness—as well as to broader dialogues and studies on China-Africa relations and China's role in the twenty-first century.

White and Fuqingese Legacies

In seventy years, the total population has risen from 127,000 to over 600,000 while the number of white settlers has actually gone down . . . Those 1,400 traders and officials are all that is needed to run Basutoland.

—Rosental, 1948

The white trader, always hopelessly outnumbered and always in need of protection from the colonial state, never looked threatening to anything or anyone.

—Mphanya, 2010

Us Chinese we provide all the goods this whole country needs. We also solve a lot of problems for this country, like the employment problem, we pay a lot of taxes to the government. We are really a big help to this country. Of course, we make some money, and know how to consume it but we engage in charity, too.

—Chen Baowang, 2014

Introduction

Lesotho has a long history of foreigners engaging in its wholesale and retail sector. Since the early days of colonisation, cohort after cohort of migrants entered this lucrative sector, carving out a good life for themselves and their families. Their engagement in the sector was, however, never only about economic practices. In very different ways, each cohort provided a template for the ideal migratory subject in Lesotho. For the Fuqingese women, these templates were shaped by two cohorts which, at first sight, appear unrelated: white traders and Fuqingese pioneer migrants. ‘White traders’ here refers to those Caucasian men and women who engaged in trade and whom the colonial administration excluded from the categories of ‘Natives’ and ‘Asiatics’. They were the first cohort of migrant traders and dominated Lesotho’s retail and wholesale sector throughout the colonial era and for large parts of the postcolonial era. Fuqingese pioneer migrants such as Chen Baowang came to Lesotho in the mid-1990s and took over many businesses from white traders after the period of rioting, violence, and political instability that the country experienced in 1998 (see Chapter 5). Subsequently, they became powerful

figures in the Fuqingese community and monopolised large parts of the wholesale and retail business in Lesotho.

Historically, white traders and Fuqingese migrants were not the only powerful migrant groups in Lesotho. Other important groups included migrants from Taiwan, from other parts of the PRC, and from India and Pakistan. In their own way, these various groups have had a significant impact on the wholesale and retail sector and influenced relations between Basotho and foreign migrants. They did not, however, constitute important reference groups for my Fuqingese informants, who mentioned them only in passing when referring to earlier migrants. In discussing the legacies of previous traders and how they influenced my informants, therefore, I have limited my discussion to white traders and Fuqingese pioneer migrants.

Although they lived in different historical circumstances, white traders and Fuqingese pioneer migrants both portrayed Lesotho as a country in need of foreigners' assistance, while downplaying their personal gains from trading activities, as the introductory quotes show. Studies on colonial Africa (Taiwo 2010) and on Chinese migrants in other African countries (Driessen 2019) show that migrants to Lesotho are not exceptional in this regard. In fact, the apparent similarities between colonial-era and modern-day traders have sparked fervent discussions around the extent to which Chinese migrants are involved in a novel colonisation of Africa (French 2014). Such arguments were difficult to apply to Lesotho at the time of my research for several reasons. First, although China has funded a number of pet projects in Lesotho—such as the parliament building and a new road connecting Maseru with Qacha's Nek—its involvement in the country has been relatively low-key compared to its engagement with countries like South Africa, Zambia, or Tanzania. Second, Lesotho's most important natural resource (water) is in the hands of South Africa, and China has not shown any interest in getting engaged in the sector (Hanisch 2013). Third, most Chinese migrants have little contact with the Chinese embassy and cannot be considered immediately beholden to the Chinese state.

Nonetheless, it is undeniable that Fuqingese migrants—like their white predecessors—dominate Lesotho's retail and wholesale sector and continue to exclude Basotho from broad-based participation in the sector. This has created considerable tensions in everyday interactions, and Basotho often have negative feelings towards Chinese migrants. Lesotho is by far not the only African country in which Chinese migrants are the 'despised other' (Park 2013, 136). However, Lesotho differs from other African countries in that the postcolonial state did little to promote Basotho participation in the wholesale and retail sector (Maliehe 2017). Instead, it continued to encourage foreigners—white traders and later Indian, Taiwanese, and Chinese migrants—to invest in the sector. The shops and houses which white traders established remain visible and influential. In 2014 many of these establishments were run by Fuqingese migrants. A handful of big outlets in cities like Maseru, and in towns like Mohale's Hoek and Quthing, continued to have 'white shops' (*bairén de*

dian). These shops were popular among middle-class Basotho, which often puzzled the Fuqingese women, as the white shops sold the same ‘Made in China’ products as Chinese shops, only at much higher prices. The Fuqingese women I engaged with also complained that Basotho would ‘respect white people, but look down on Chinese’ (Li Yan, 28 years old, Maseru, August 21, 2014). As I show in this chapter, many Basotho perceive Fuqingese migrants and white traders as two very different types of migrants.

In the colonial context (Eldredge 2007), white traders were an accepted and even lauded minority. They were tolerated by Basotho and welcomed by the colonial and postcolonial state. White traders successfully staged themselves as benevolent migrants who contributed to Lesotho and spoke fluent Sesotho. They lived in respectable and representable circumstances and had a good life to which the Basotho middle and upper classes aspired. Although their high standards of living were at the expense of Basotho, white traders remained an important reference point for both Basotho and Chinese migrants (including the Fuqingese women) to discuss the ideal migrant and ideas of a good life. Fuqingese pioneer migrants, who created their own legacies, were another important point of reference. Most white traders and Fuqingese pioneer migrants have long left Lesotho, but their legacies cast a long shadow on the present lives of the Fuqingese women whose stories I present below.

In this chapter, I analyse how Fuqingese women constructed their migratory selves in Lesotho through and beyond the legacies of white traders and Fuqingese pioneer migrants. To specify these legacies, I compare the economic practices of white traders and Fuqingese pioneer migrants and their ideas of a good life. I open this chapter with an ethnographic vignette of my visit to a former white trading station built during the late colonial era, which in 2014 was being run by a Fuqingese woman. This is followed by a historical overview of white traders (1880–1998) and then by a discussion of continuities in the economic practices of white traders and Fuqingese pioneer migrants. Finally, I examine how both the white traders’ and the Fuqingese pioneers’ concepts of the good life were reflected in the way the Fuqingese women imagined and thought about their own lives in Lesotho.

Colonial Traces

My first contact with the legacies of white traders in Lesotho was established through a series of coincidences. It all started with my second visit to Quthing—the capital town of Lesotho’s southernmost district—in April 2014. During the visit, I met Mr Huang in a supermarket near the police station. Mr Huang was from Fuqing, and he and his wife had been in Lesotho for a year. During our first encounter, he seemed interested in my research project. He understood why it would be important for me as an anthropologist to stay for extended periods with Fuqingese migrants. He welcomed me to visit the supermarket he was working in, and even promised that

he would ask his boss if I could stay with them for a while. Surprised by his welcoming attitude, I called him after two weeks to ask if I could come and stay, to which he simply replied, 'No problem!'

When I arrived at the supermarket, Mr Huang seemed surprised. He was busy talking on the phone in Fuqing dialect. After he ended his call, he told me that he would take me to a friend. Without any fuss, he told me to take my bags and to get into his car—a run-down 'bakkie' (the South African name for a pickup). At the big T-junction, he turned towards the direction of Mohale's Hoek. Noticing that I was a bit uneasy, he told me that his friends were looking forward to meeting me. After a ten-minute drive, we reached Matsiane High School. Here, Mr Huang turned left onto a dirt road that led down a valley. Occasionally, we saw children playing next to the dirt road, women sitting in front of their houses, and herd boys tending to their cattle. Compared to Quthing, the settlements on the way were less dense, and reminded me of the poorer suburbs of Maseru.

Mr Huang stopped the car in front of a supermarket that was a former trading station and by far the largest establishment in the village. Smaller shops were grouped around it, including a liquor store and a small shop that sold fat cakes and Ricoffy, a cheap but popular brand of instant coffee. Basotho youth were loading maize meal bags onto donkeys, and a few women sat in front of the supermarket chatting. As we got out of the car, we were greeted by Mr Huang's friend, Mrs Bo. She was in her mid-50s and was a Fuqingese pioneer migrant. Like other early pioneers, she had come to Lesotho in 1998, but—unlike some male pioneers—she was only moderately successful. In all those years, she had been unable to expand her business, and she rarely returned to Fuqing. Her only son refused to come to Lesotho, and without the help of her husband and brother-in-law she would have been unable to keep the business going. Yet, despite all this, Mrs Bo was not unhappy.

As she showed me around her business, Mrs Bo kept saying that she was afraid that I would not be used to 'this'. I replied that it would not matter and that I was an easy guest. At first, I thought she was referring to food. Later, as we walked towards their house, I understood that she had been talking about their living arrangements. Mrs Bo and her husband were renting a former trading station that belonged to one of the few white families in Quthing. In fact, her landlords were from a well-known family who have been trading in the southern part of Lesotho since the colonial era. Until 1998, Mrs Bo's landlords were running the supermarket as well as two liquor stores in the nearby town of Quthing. In April 1998 they rented both the supermarket and their old house to her. The house was typical of buildings from Lesotho's colonial era: single-storey, sandstone, and with a corrugated iron roof. The main entrance was at the centre of the house and led directly into the living room. Standing in the overgrown garden, I noticed a smaller building, a pool house, and a tennis court. The pool house had been turned into a shed, and the tennis court was abandoned and had become the home of rebellious aloe plants.

Mrs Bo had turned the house into a fortress: the windows and doors outside, as well as every door inside, had iron burglar bars to block potential intruders. The interior was run-down and dirty, contained only basic furniture, and was overflowing with boxes of food and other items. The kitchen looked as if a fire had once broken out in it, but on closer observation I saw that the blackened walls were a mixture of grease and smoke from years of cooking on a gas stove. The bathroom contained a half-broken toilet and a shower. The once pleasant view of the garden from the rooms was blocked by an impermeable metal wall. Mrs Bo explained that the bars and metal plates were security measures they had taken after her husband had been held at gunpoint in the house. The dirt and chaos, she added, was the result of her maid's sloppiness and refusal to clean more than the floor. She continued, 'My home in Fuqing is not like this. Here, I don't have time to look after the house, so we have no other way but to accept the state of this' (Mrs Bo, 55 years old, Quthing, April 14, 2014). In comparison, Basotho and white trader families took great efforts to keep their houses clean and tidy.

Mrs Bo's white landlords lived right next to her, on the same property, in a comparatively new house built in the early 1990s. Theirs was also a sandstone house, with a new red corrugated iron roof, a big chimney for the fireplace and a braai (barbecue) stand. Each room had large windows that were likewise framed by iron bars. These, however, seemed a natural part of the windows and did not create the same fortress atmosphere as in Mrs Bo's house. The centrepiece of the house was a large terrace overlooking a neatly trimmed and lush green lawn framed by flowerbeds of crane flowers and aloe plants. In contrast to Mrs Bo's house, everything here seemed larger, better kept, and more inviting. Even the watchdogs seemed healthier than Mrs Bo's, who looked more like stray dogs and lived off her leftover food. The contrast between the two houses marked a difference in material and spatial setups, but also symbolised very different experiences and lived realities.

Initially, I did not give this observation a second thought because I had visited other Fuqingese migrants, and their houses were similarly run-down and tightly secured. For instance, Li Yan and her husband lived in a compound in Maseru in which only Fuqingese migrants and their friends were allowed. A Mosotho security guard always stood in front of the gate and was not allowed inside the compound, out of fear that he may assist in the execution of a robbery. Wu Xi and her family had removed the ceiling panels in their house because they were afraid that robbers would enter through the roof. Chen Jun lived in a former storage room which had no windows, 24-hour video surveillance cameras and burglar bars in front of every door. I experienced this feeling of constant insecurity during my stay at Mrs Bo's house and came to understand the necessity of turning their accommodation into a fortress.

In fact, my stay ended abruptly with a robbery on the second day. Around midnight, seven people broke into the supermarket, and a 30-minute shoot-out between the intruders and the ill-equipped security guards ensued. As we heard

6

Reflecting on Past Choices

Really serious entrepreneurs will not migrate. Those who migrate are small bosses (*xiao laoban*) and you should not argue with them. If you are running a company and you reach a certain level, you will have a sense for your historical responsibility. If not, how can you face history?

—Cao Dewang, 2017

Introduction

On a cold November afternoon in 2017, I was sitting at a German train station and scrolling through posts in the WeChat group Look at Fuqing (*Kan Fuqing*). This group featured daily news on Fuqing and I checked it regularly to stay updated. I saw the usual news about housing prices, new developments, and food. I was about to switch to another group when my attention was caught by a headline: ‘Cao Dewang: Real and Serious Entrepreneurs Do Not Migrate’ (Jia and Wang 2017). Cao is a famous Fuqingese entrepreneur who became the head of Fuyao Glass Company in the early 1990s and was recently featured in the Netflix documentary *American Factory*. Under his management, the company transformed from a small factory into the global market leader for car windows. Like so many Fuqingese, Cao migrated briefly to the United States in the early 2000s. In the interview, Cao explained the differences between those who migrate and those who stay. He argued that those who migrate abroad are ‘small bosses’, while those who stay are ‘really serious entrepreneurs’. The difference between the two groups lay, in his view, in how they related to ‘history’ and to what extent they accepted their ‘historical responsibility’.

Cao’s statement attests to broader changes in the public discourse on overseas migration in Fuqing—a shift in popular opinion, in which staying rather than leaving is now celebrated. Until the mid-2000s, overseas migration was celebrated as promising ‘lucrative opportunities’ (Pieke et al. 2004, 45). Migration was both an individual project aimed at pursuing one’s own aspirations (establishing a business and becoming successful) as well as a family project aimed at diversifying income opportunities (Ong and Nonini 1997; Ho 2002; Pieke et al. 2004). The local state

in Fuqing counted on donations from overseas migrants to build schools, roads, and other public projects. Overseas migrants readily donated and were, in return, publicly praised by the state as models to be emulated by others. However, when I conducted my field research in Lesotho (2014) and in Fuqing (2015 and 2018), it seemed that overseas migration was no longer considered to be a desirable option. Moreover, the state no longer needed overseas donations because investments from the central and provincial government had poured in. With these investments, the city centre of Fuqing was remodelled, a high-speed railway station opened, a deep-water port built, and investment zones expanded.

Fuqing's new discourse on overseas migration revives older arguments about the need to contribute to China's nation-building project from within China, rather than from abroad. For instance, many members of China's educational elite studied in the United States, Japan, and Europe during the 1920s. Although they had promising opportunities there, many returned because they prided themselves on their sense of 'responsibility' for the Chinese nation-building project (Cheek 2015). Similarly, overseas Chinese in South East Asia—typically merchants, traders, and other businesspeople—returned to China after the founding of the People's Republic in 1949 to help build a new China (Peterson 2012, 103–106). They believed that they should make personal sacrifices for the greater cause. This meant giving up opportunities abroad which at the time were much more promising than a return to China, which had just emerged from a civil war and had suffered heavy losses during the Japanese occupation. To be sure, the China that Cao Dewang decided to return to and stay in was nothing like the China of 1949. Hence, his decision was perhaps less difficult and heroic than his boast about 'facing history' suggests.

Nevertheless, my conversations with Fuqingese women in 2018 also suggested that Cao's assessment of overseas migration mirrored common sentiments in Fuqing. The women who had stayed in Fuqing talked confidently about their decision to stay, as well as their past and future projects. Their confidence was partially rooted in the new popular opinion that those who stayed should be celebrated. The Fuqingese women who had gone to Lesotho, on the other hand, expressed ambiguity over their decision to migrate. This sense of ambiguity about their past and future was, I argue, indirectly related to changes in the public's perception of overseas migrants, who are nowadays discredited as 'small bosses'. Like other Chinese migrants, the Fuqingese women initially went abroad because they believed that this was the only way to avoid 'being left behind' (Xiang 2014, 186). However, migration to Lesotho did not become an 'instrumental means to jump to the future' (Xiang 2014, 186). Instead, the Fuqingese women I engaged with felt stuck in Lesotho, with no opportunities to return to China any time soon.

In this chapter, I present a bricolage of encounters with my key informants in 2015 and 2018. Taken together, these encounters allowed me to reflect on the diverse meanings that my informants ascribed to returning, staying, or leaving. Some of my older informants who were still operating businesses in Lesotho—such as Chen

Jun and Wu Xi—had returned to Fuqing for the summer, while Chen Fei and Chen Feng had moved to Shanghai, where they were expanding their businesses together with their respective husbands. The younger women whom I had originally met in Lesotho—such as Xiao Hong and Chen Xi—were now back in Fuqing, but with very different lives. Xiao Hong was a jet-setting businesswoman, while Chen Xi was pregnant with her first child and was working with her husband in a small computer repair shop. I start the chapter with an ethnographic vignette of my return to China in 2018 and then continue with portraits of the women and the varied ways in which they evaluated the meanings of returning, staying, and leaving.

China 2018

On August 31, 2018, my plane landed at Xiamen International Airport. As always after a long flight, I felt both tired and nervously excited. I quickly turned on my phone to check for a Wi-Fi connection because I wanted to see if I had any new messages from Xiao Hong. She had promised that she would come and pick me up at the airport and that we would spend a day in Xiamen before returning to Fuqing together. This was not the first time that Xiao Hong and I had made plans to meet up in China. As recounted in Chapter 5, she had also promised to meet up with me when I did my fieldwork in Fuqing in 2015, but she had been detained at the airport in Johannesburg and could not return to Fuqing for several months. Although the incident a few years ago had been out of her control, I was afraid that something unexpected would prevent us from meeting this time around too. To my dismay, I could not get Wi-Fi with a foreign mobile number, and my German SIM card did not allow me to use mobile data. After I picked up my luggage and made it through customs, I found myself standing in the big arrival hall looking for Xiao Hong.

She was nowhere to be seen, and I started contemplating what to do next. In my despair, I turned to a young man at the tourist information desk and explained my situation. He took pity on me and set up a local Wi-Fi hotspot with his private phone. With this, I could finally access WeChat. To my relief, I had several messages from Xiao Hong telling me that she was on her way but was stuck in traffic. After thanking the young man for his help, I stepped outside into the afternoon heat of Xiamen and waited for Xiao Hong to arrive. When she got out of the taxi, I could not help but notice a vast transformation from her days in Lesotho. She was dressed impeccably in the latest fashion, sporting a Louis Vuitton handbag and sunglasses. She was constantly on the phone discussing with her business partners and making plans with her friends in Xiamen to meet up later.

As our car sped towards the city centre, I took in the changes since my last visit three years ago. The airport still gave off the air of a provincial airport, even though Xiamen was considered an emerging city and had hosted the BRICS meeting in 2016. New apartment buildings had sprung up along the highway, but the outward appearance of the city centre had not changed much. What had changed significantly,

however, were the city's inhabitants and their lifestyles, as I learned during my time with Xiao Hong and her friends. After checking in to the Royal Ritz Hotel—a supposedly four-star hotel which did not live up to either its name or its stars—Xiao Hong suggested that we first go to the hairdresser's. I told her that I was happy to accompany her but did not need a haircut. She laughed at me and answered: 'Me neither! I just get my hair washed, my head massaged, and hair arranged. It's so cheap, I almost never wash my hair at home anymore!' (Xiao Hong, 22 years old, Xiamen, August 31, 2018).

When I asked her how much it cost, she casually replied: 'Oh just 100 RMB.' I quickly calculated in my head that she probably spent over 3,000 RMB (roughly 500 USD) each month just on having her hair washed. Compared to her other expenses—such as several thousand RMB on a gym membership in Fuqing's most luxurious hotel, as well as her frequent travel and expensive dining—3,000 RMB was a relatively small sum. Yet, when compared to the salary of Fuqingese migrants in Lesotho, it was no small sum. When Xiao Hong had worked at the shop in Maseru, her monthly salary had been just over 6,000 RMB. Back in China, she had become a self-employed businesswoman who earned easily enough to cover her monthly expenses of over 40,000 RMB.

In the evening we met with Xiao Hong's new friends and business partners at an expensive restaurant. The conversation quickly turned to money and expenses. One friend told us that she had just transferred 10,000 RMB to an acquaintance via WeChat Pay because he needed some money. It turned out that she often lent people money without even asking what they needed it for or when they would pay it back. This was not carelessness on her part but simply because she earned so much money that a few thousand RMB were insignificant to her. What struck me during the conversation was that the amount of money that Xiao Hong and her friends earned and spent was not only above average in China but also above average in Austria, where I lived at the time. One member of the group practically called me a fool for doing a PhD and working at a university for what she considered to be a low salary. She half-jokingly, half-seriously told me that I could easily earn 30,000 RMB a month if I opened an English language school. Xiao Hong and the others readily agreed with her and stressed that it was so much easier to make a lot of money in China than abroad.

They were not suggesting that foreigners in China would be able to make money more easily than Chinese people, as was the case when I first came to China in 2005. Back then, simply looking European or American could get you a well-paid job. For instance, my American roommate—with a BA in economics—became vice principal at a private school without ever having taught at a school, let alone worked in administration. Xiao Hong and her friends, on the contrary, suggested that the days when foreigners without proper qualifications could make a lot of money in China were over. They attributed this to the fact that Chinese returnees from abroad often had qualifications from Ivy League schools and were therefore better qualified than

the average foreigner. They also pointed out that China's growing urban middle class demanded high-quality services and products and could no longer be fooled into paying a higher price for something simply because it was foreign or from abroad. Their comments suggested that a fundamental shift had occurred in how Chinese people viewed foreigners and their presence in China.

It is important to point out that Xiao Hong's friends were not necessarily the 'high-quality' subjects which the Chinese state celebrated. Most of them had migrated from Fujian's countryside to Xiamen, had no university degree, did not speak any foreign languages, and had never been abroad, except perhaps for holidays. Nonetheless, they considered themselves experts on everything from world affairs to career advice. At the end of their long elaborations, the take-home message for me was always the same: China had been poor in the past and had looked up to prosperous Western countries, but now the roles had reversed. The comments and attitudes of Xiao Hong and her friends pointed to a new self-confidence in ordinary Chinese people which I had not previously witnessed. China's economic success and national discourses on China's rebirth (*fluxing*) clearly nurtured such attitudes. However, I could not help but wonder how it affected my other informants, especially those who spent most of their time abroad.

A little love

In August 2018, Chen Jun returned to Fuqing for six weeks to spend time with her three children, who at the time were four, six, and nine years old. They were all born in Lesotho. They had stayed with Chen Jun until the age of three and had then returned to Fuqing to attend kindergarten. Chen Jun and her husband had built a four-storey house in their home village. Ten years of 'heart-blood' (*xinxue*) in Lesotho—that is, hard work—had been necessary to be able to afford it. Each floor consisted of a three-bedroom apartment, two bathrooms, a kitchen, and a living room. Chen Jun and her husband lived on the third floor. Her in-laws occupied the second floor, and the other two apartments were occupied by her husband's siblings. Except for Chen Jun's mother-in-law and her brother-in-law's wife, all the working-age adult inhabitants spent most of the year in Lesotho. Only the children and old people lived permanently in Fuqing. Being able to spend time with her children was precious to Chen Jun, and she tried her best to make up for her long absences by spoiling them with toys and taking them to amusement parks and restaurants.

When she left for Lesotho in the early 2000s, Chen Jun's only goal was to make money to provide for her family. Over the last five years, this goal had become increasingly difficult to attain, and she longed for recognition and empathy from family and friends in Fuqing, as demonstrated in a post she wrote on WeChat shortly before returning to Fuqing in 2018:

Conclusion

Carry: Mother, let me tell you the truth. I was deceiving you. I asked teacher Zhang to pretend to marry me, so you wouldn't force me to go on a date with a potential husband.

Mother: But why do you deceive your mother?

Carry: Mother, I don't want to get married so early. I want to go to China and study. I want to do it like the Chinese: roll up my sleeves to work harder (*lu qi xiuzi jia you gan*), make the whole world press the like button.

Mother: My little darling, why didn't you tell me before?

Carry: I was afraid you wouldn't agree.

Mother: How could I disagree? When I was young, the Chinese medical teams came and saved my life. Now the children of China come to Africa and build a railroad for us. They also train my little daughter to become such an outstanding person. I love the Chinese! I love China!

—Excerpt from *Chinese New Year's Gala 2018*.

On the evening of February 15, 2018, I was—like my informants in Fuqing and Lesotho—watching the Chinese New Year's Gala (*chunjie wanhui*). I was stunned when I saw the 14-minute skit on the opening of the Mombasa-Nairobi railway line. In the skit, two fictional Kenyan women—Carry, played by an African exchange student, and her mother, played by a Chinese actor wearing blackface¹—argue about the most appropriate future for Carry. The mother wants 18-year-old Carry to start looking for a husband, believing that she has no time to waste. Carry, who has just completed her training with the Chinese teacher Zhang as a train attendant for the newly opened Mombasa-Nairobi railway line, disagrees. Like some of the younger Chinese women I engaged with, Carry has never directly discussed her ideas about her future with her mother. Feeling cornered, she finally blurts out her actual plans. Inspired by her contact with teacher Zhang and her involvement with a Chinese aid project, Carry wants to study in China and work before settling down with a family. While Carry's mother readily agrees to her daughter's plans, the

1. The skit has been rightly criticised for its racist depiction of Africans (BBC News, February 16, 2018) and for featuring a 'Chinese actress in blackface with huge prosthetic buttocks representing an African woman' (A. Taylor 2018, 1).

young Chinese women I met did not have such support and encouragement from their parents—they often could not further their studies and had to incorporate their parents' wishes into their plans for the future.

Since the country's economic reforms, education has become a cornerstone of social mobility in China (Fong 2002; L. Zhang 2012), and parents from all backgrounds hope that their children will attend university, or at the very least a technical college. Although the number of graduates from institutions of higher education has steadily risen over the past few decades, there are still many Chinese who only complete the nine years of compulsory schooling. For them, internal and international migration offer an alternative route to social mobility (Chu 2010). When earnings abroad were significantly higher than in China, parents who left China could often quickly afford material markers of success (a house, a car, and other consumer items) as well as social markers (education for their children) (Morooka and Liang 2009). Those who stayed in China and migrated to China's cities had to cast off their ruralness and fashion themselves, literally and figuratively, into urban subjects (H. Yan 2008). The Fuqingese women whose stories I have presented in this book complicate these established narratives on internal and international Chinese migration. Those who migrated abroad could provide a better material life for their children but could not help them succeed in China's competitive education system. Those who migrated to the city fashioned themselves into urban subjects on their own terms and considered themselves to be more successful than those who had migrated abroad.

To understand why these women did not conform to established norms, I have argued for the importance of analysing how China's bigger state projects and national narratives have played out at the local level. Since the founding of the People's Republic, the state has carefully propagated a master narrative which links its past and present projects into one grand story of success. To achieve this, the state has relied on narrow, albeit changing, definitions of what should be considered tropes of success, not only at the macro level but also at the micro level. The state has thereby at least indirectly shaped individual and collective aspirations and ideas of how to succeed. However, at the local level and in the everyday lives of many Chinese people such as the Fuqingese women, these projects had mixed outcomes. This has complicated ordinary people's chances at success—both according to their own and the state's definitions of success.

China's economic reforms are a good example. Although they significantly improved overall living conditions in China and are generally considered to have been a major success, they were carried out unevenly. Cities like Fuqing were not able to compete with cities such as Shanghai and Beijing. In fact, despite some improvements brought on by the reforms, many of the Fuqingese women continued to face significant challenges. Moreover, the extent to which they felt that the reforms had brought them personal success was also linked to generational differences, and to how they defined sweetness. Because of specific local circumstances,

the older cohort was satisfied with having their basic material needs met, such as having enough clothes and food and maybe a house of their own. For many of them, enduring bitterness was a precondition to achieving social mobility and sweetness, and success was linked to material markers. The younger cohorts—especially those who returned to or stayed in China—were concerned with leading and portraying a ‘perfect’ life. Unlike the older cohort, the younger cohorts no longer believed that it was necessary to endure bitterness for some distant future reward. On the contrary, they strongly believed that they were entitled to enjoy the same comforts and opportunities as the more privileged segments of Chinese society. Some of this younger generation—such as Xiao Hong and her colleagues and friends—readily bought into the state’s patriotic narratives about China’s economic success and global power in the twenty-first century.

China’s engagement with Africa is another big project against which the everyday lives of my informants in Lesotho unfolded and which I have proposed cannot be understood through China’s foreign policies alone. The state’s repertoire is much broader than its foreign policies, and often draws on narrative practices from the Mao era. These practices were and continue to be powerful tools to legitimise the Chinese state and its representatives. As such, they seem primarily designed to speak to Chinese/domestic audiences rather than to African/foreign audiences. However, how the state explains, portrays, and ultimately legitimises its engagement in Africa to Chinese/domestic audiences is key to understanding ordinary people’s perceptions of China’s projects in Africa in general, and Chinese migrants’ interactions with Africans on the ground.

To make this point, I would like to offer a detailed analysis of the above-mentioned skit in the 2018 New Year’s Gala. The skit was specifically set in Kenya, not Lesotho, but there are interesting observations to be made which are pertinent to broader discussions about Chinese-African relations. The skit’s plot was very similar to the plot of earlier liberation stories told at state-orchestrated public events during the Chinese land reforms. Such public events no longer take place in China, but the fact that their basic narrative plot resurfaced in recent years in the most-watched show in China indicates that they still matter. At these events, poor peasants told stories which glorified the state—represented by the Communist Party—as their saviour. Similarly, Carry’s mother in the 2018 skit portrayed China and Chinese aid workers such as Mr Zhang as the saviours of Africa. While the fictive African woman expressed her ‘gratitude’ by exclaiming that she loved the Chinese and China, poor peasants during the Mao era exclaimed that they loved Mao Zedong and the Communist Party. Although my Chinese informants in Lesotho did not perceive themselves as the ‘saviours’ of Basotho, they certainly felt that China was doing a lot for Africa, and in return they expected some level of gratitude from Basotho.

As with events in the Mao era, the experience of the speakers in the 2018 skit was elevated to the experience of an entire group of people and became a vehicle to

link diverse historical contexts into a coherent narrative. In this case, the Mombasa–Nairobi railway line and the Africans involved in it became representative of all of China’s big infrastructure projects in Africa. However, there are significant differences between projects implemented during the Mao era and those implemented after 1978. Historically, the TAZARA Railway, completed in 1975, was the first Chinese railway project in Africa (Monson 2009). China was still a developing country at the time, and its leaders stressed the need for self-reliance and solidarity among socialist countries. The Mombasa–Nairobi railway line, on the other hand, was executed under very different circumstances. In 2018 China was a leading global economic player carrying out major projects in Africa under the guise of ‘South-South and win-win cooperation.’ From the perspective of the Chinese state, these differences are to be understood as part of an evolution which still allows for a linear story: China supports African countries by bringing infrastructure and other development projects. None of my informants were very familiar with the history of China–Africa cooperation, and they certainly were not interested in changes in the state’s motivations for engaging with Africa. However, my informants were all aware of big infrastructure projects across Africa. I would argue that this is no coincidence but another sign that the state is able to sell its story because it effectively presents characters, experiences, and projects that audiences can relate to—all the while legitimising its role in bringing modernity to ordinary people.

How the state achieves this, however, and who it considers as key to this project, has changed significantly since the founding of the People’s Republic (M. Yang 1994; Bakken 2000). During the Mao era, women rather than men were ‘the figures through which national modernity was imagined’ (Hershatter 2007, 79). Modernity became equated with the liberation of women from ‘family-based oppression’ (Hershatter 2007, 7) and the state played a key role in this liberation (Manning 2006). The 2018 skit incorporated these themes, albeit in a very different context, by suggesting that Carry was the embodiment of the modern African woman who longed to be liberated. Like Chinese women in the 1950s, Carry wanted to work, to be more independent from her parents, and to marry later. In both contexts, work or early marriage are configured as two opposing and incompatible choices: while participating in work is seen as representative of ‘modernity’, early marriage is seen as ‘traditional’ and ‘outdated’. In the 2018 skit the Chinese state—represented through the teacher Mr Zhang—becomes the supporter of the African women’s cause and provides them with ‘modern’ alternatives. This suggests that China is not only providing modern material modernities to Africa (Chappatte 2014; Dittgen 2017), but also templates for ‘new modes of being human’ (Taiwo 2010, 5).

The state’s visions of development—both in China and overseas—have often had little relevance at the local level because they have been so far removed from local history and the everyday lives of ordinary people. Lesotho is a case in point. Older Kenyans and Tanzanians might remember the aid workers sent to their respective countries during the Mao era and—like Carry’s mother—may even look

back on those times with fond memories, but Lesotho has a very different history of relations with China, one which is further complicated by its relations with Taiwan. The first 'Chinese-looking' aid workers in Lesotho came from Taiwan with their own unique rhetoric (I. Taylor 2010). Starting in the late 1960s until the early 1990s, Taiwan primarily supported Lesotho in order to keep an African ally and to build an anti-socialist and anti-communist bulwark in southern Africa. From the onset, there was a clear hierarchy in Taiwan-Lesotho interactions, resembling traditional donor-recipient relations. Taiwan was economically more successful, and Lesotho was expected to be grateful and willing to learn from this donor. At the grassroots level, Taiwanese in Lesotho were perceived as being in a very different economic situation to Basotho. In contrast, Chinese aid workers in the 1970s who were involved in projects like the TAZARA Railway could credibly claim to be from a country whose situation was not so different to Tanzania's—lending some validity to China's third world solidarity rhetoric. It is also important to note that the projects that Taiwan implemented—such as a rice farm—were often small-scale and ill-suited to Lesotho's environment. The Taiwanese—just as Mainland Chinese would later do—consulted and engaged mainly with Lesotho's political leaders, who used these contacts for their personal and political gain. Ordinary Basotho quickly realised this and transposed these experiences onto later engagements by Mainland Chinese.

While China has tried to set itself apart from Taiwan and its 'dollar diplomacy' (I. Taylor 2010), there are striking continuities in how its engagements in Lesotho have been conducted. With the exception of Chinese medical teams, China has not implemented any long-term grassroots projects in Lesotho which could give credibility to their political rhetoric of 'win-win' and equal partnerships. Most Chinese investments in Lesotho have been short-term pet projects, such as the construction of buildings or roads, which rarely allow for meaningful exchanges. Like their Taiwanese predecessors, the Chinese involved in these projects originate from a more economically powerful country. While they might draw parallels between China's situation at the beginning of the 1980s and that of ordinary Basotho in the present day, they cannot obscure the reality that the majority of Chinese workers in Lesotho are paid much more than ordinary Basotho and know that they can return to a comparatively more comfortable situation in China. Because of these asymmetries, Basotho typically do not see any evidence of goodwill in Chinese-led engagements which would soften their attitude towards Chinese people.

The 2018 New Year's Gala skit portrayed an idealised version of Chinese-African relations, culminating in Carry's mother emphatically gushing 'I love the Chinese! I love China!' Unwittingly, however, the skit's racist and generalised depiction of Africans revealed the problematic attitudes held by many Chinese officials and ordinary people. Viewers around the world were understandably outraged not only by the Chinese actor's blackface and exaggerated buttocks but also by the inclusion of a black performer playing a monkey and 'tribal' African dancers. Contrary

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