

Tales of Hope, Tastes of Bitterness

Chinese Road Builders in Ethiopia

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Introduction

We are surviving in order to survive.

—Chinese manager in Ethiopia, July 27, 2017

Yu Bohai's comment captures a widespread sentiment among Chinese road builders in Ethiopia. As we sped over the newly compacted road base in his black Toyota Hilux, Yu explained his predicament. The charm hanging from the rear-view mirror—a green imitation jade Buddha on a red string—knocked against the windscreen as we left the main road for a pitted track around the construction work.

To survive in Ethiopia meant to swallow disappointment. Yu's initial expectations of life and work there stood in sharp relief to the less rosy realities on the ground, leaving him disenchanted. He could not get his head around why Ethiopians were so unwelcoming, or, as he put it, "unfriendly." "We [Chinese] are being discriminated against." Convinced of the benevolence of their activities, Yu, like many of his coworkers, had imagined Ethiopians to be keenly awaiting Chinese development assistance.

In fact, the attitudes of members of the host society bore little resemblance to what Yu envisaged. Ethiopian laborers proved—in Yu's eyes—to be irresponsible and indolent, and local residents recalcitrant and uncooperative. The unsupportive attitude of state authorities made matters worse. Rather than protecting Chinese corporate interests, they appeared to be on the side of local laborers. Like most Chinese road builders in Ethiopia, Yu was puzzled by, and resentful of, the apparent ingratitude of Ethiopians, their lack of cooperation, and worse, their repeated attempts to sabotage the building work.

This turn of events led to disappointment on the part of Yu and his coworkers—a sentiment that originates, however, not only from the challenges of everyday encounters with Ethiopians on and off the construction site. Their tastes of bitterness are embedded in expectations that are intricately linked to their position in a rapidly developing Chinese society, in which they try to stay afloat. Enduring hardships—or "eating bitterness"

(*chiku*)—in Ethiopia was a means to “survive” (*shengcun*) in China. Men like Yu moved to Africa for work not only to build a respectable life at home, but also to sustain it. Moving overseas was a way to become someone. “I used to be nobody in China. Only when I am in Ethiopia I feel I have some value,” Yu contemplated once. Like most Chinese migrants in Africa, he grew up in the countryside. After serving in the army for five years, he took up work as a builder with a state-owned enterprise in his home province, Heilongjiang. After a few years, his employer offered him to transfer to Africa for much better pay. He jumped at the opportunity.

A self-proclaimed “old overseas,” Yu had lived in Ethiopia for nearly ten years. I first met him in Tigray, northern Ethiopia, in 2011, before crossing paths again in 2017 at a road project in the southwestern corner of the country, close to the South-Sudanese border. He had managed to climb up from foreman to deputy manager. In 2011, Yu insisted that he would be back in China after, at most, three years. The reason why he was still in Ethiopia keeping body and soul together after ten years, he confided, was the fact that there are no opportunities for him in China. This is not to say that he did not want to return. “I can’t possibly stay my whole life in Africa,” he exclaimed somewhat agitatedly upon my question whether he planned to remain.

Following nearly four decades of mass migration from the countryside to the cities and to overseas destinations, mobility has become the norm in contemporary China. To be mobile is a coveted way of life, a cultural imperative, and a means of crafting a fulfilling future. For men like Yu, however, mobility is as much a necessity as a value or a resource. Only by migrating are they able to stake claim to social presence in a rapidly developing Chinese society. In order to achieve a feeling of belonging as well as a sense of dignified personhood, they are compelled to be *and* remain on the move.

If mobility is not necessarily perceived to lead anywhere in the present tense, it continues to hold a radical promise of future belonging. This is what kept Chinese men like Yu Bohai in Ethiopia. “Work is our life. We don’t have anything else,” explained Yu with slight self-scorn. He works seven days a week, driving from one site along the project road to another to supervise the construction work, assign tasks, and give instructions. When he has no work on his hands, he slides the driver’s seat backward and throws his feet on the steering wheel to watch the historical drama series *Three Kingdoms* on his Huawei Smartphone, a device he bought in Ethiopia after his iPhone from China got stolen.

“You don’t understand why I don’t just quit my job and go home. . . . You can. You have social security [in Europe].” Even though Yu’s monthly salary has gone up from CNY 6,000 in 2011 to CNY 25,000 in 2017, and despite the fact that he earns much more than the average Chinese worker in Ethiopia, his income was not enough to ease a lingering feeling of insecurity: “What if

something happens one day?" This question was repeated by many Chinese migrant men I met in Ethiopia. Yu and his peers were driven—or rather pushed—by a sense of insecurity, buckled as they were under the weight of what they called "social pressure" (*shehui yali*) in China. Their decision to move to Ethiopia with domestic companies was pragmatic rather than idealistic. They admitted frankly that earning a better salary was their main, if not their sole, motivation for going to Ethiopia.

Despite their pragmatism about their own lives, Chinese road builders were more idealistic in their desire to transform the lives of African others. Their aspirations of "helping Ethiopia become powerful and prosperous," as one engineer put it, account for the bitterness they swallowed in response to the apparent ingratitude of those whose lives they sought to transform. This bitter taste, then, reveals the discrepancy between their initial expectations and the realities they faced on the ground.

Combined, tales of hope and tastes of bitterness cast light on Chinese-led development from below, revealing its contested and, at times, fraught nature. Indeed, Chinese-Ethiopian encounters frequently turned out to be *Ethiopian-Chinese* encounters, as Adams Bodom (2009), critical of the assumed asymmetry between African countries and China, would have it. Ethiopians challenged the very social and political inequalities inherent to Chinese involvement in Africa. As a result, they came to set the terms of the encounter and the standards of its outcomes. Chinese migrants' narratives of bitterness, then, embodied the lack of agency that they perceived to possess.

The mundane actions of Chinese workers and their interactions with the Ethiopian laborers on and off the construction site thus reveal the ambivalent nature of the encounter. In the West we have depicted the Chinese engagement with Africa much as we used to describe European colonialism—as an abstract force, "a *structure* imposed on local *practice*" (Stoler 1989, 135)—or we have invested abstract concepts (e.g., "China") with human qualities. A glance at headlines illustrates the point: "When China Met Africa" (Francis and Francis 2011), "China's Material Needs: The Hungry Dragon" (the *Economist*, February 19, 2004), "Resource-Hungry China Invests in Africa" (*Reuters*, September 29, 2009), "China's Oil Fears over South Sudan Fighting" (*BBC News*, January 8, 2014), "China: Africa's Plunderer or Growth Partner?" (*BBC News*, May 21, 2012). China is described as a human being (or a dragon) with appetites and needs; so is Africa. The politically charged concepts and sensationalist tone of the debate have cast a shadow over the people who actually live the China-in-Africa experience. More importantly, they conceal the power of local practice to challenge sociopolitical asymmetries.

In her revealing study of representations of China in Africa in British broadsheet newspapers, Emma Mawdsley (2008) demonstrates that the stereotypes commonly paint the Chinese in Africa as criminals, while Africans

are painted as victims and Westerners as do-gooders. Chinese migrants are routinely portrayed as a homogenous collective, Chinese enterprises as “nationally discrete entities” (518) with single interests, and Chinese engagement with the continent—“China’s African safari”—as merciless and unscrupulous, in contrast with supposedly benign Western involvement.¹ This book highlights the opposite of these media tropes: Ethiopians vis-à-vis their expatriate employers as in a position of power, the Chinese community as heterogeneous, and the Chinese workers as victims of their own aspirations.

“The Italians are back, but now with slit eyes”

Chinese road-building activities in Ethiopia are directly linked to a slowdown in the domestic building industry in China, which has pushed construction companies and their workers overseas. China’s road network is by and large saturated, Chinese road builders in Ethiopia explained. Recent activities amount chiefly to the maintenance and upgrading of existing roads. Many Chinese firms operating in Ethiopia are confronted with a shrinking number of projects in China. A few have moved out of the domestic industry altogether.

“They’d be better going to Africa than Tiananmen,” one engineer remarked somewhat sarcastically, referring to the government’s concern with the creation of employment in the face of a growing number of unemployed professionals and skilled workers in China’s construction sector. Feared as disaffected, this predominantly male segment of society forms a potential threat to social stability that the central government anxiously seeks to preserve (J. Yang 2010). To relieve pressure in the job market in this industry, the government requires state-owned enterprises at home and overseas to absorb a specific number of new engineering graduates each year. This engineer, who was in his early 40s, had resigned from his job to move to Ethiopia for a lighter workload and a better salary. On his last project in China, he had held three posts simultaneously, not because of a lack of personnel—on the contrary, he reckoned that 30–40 percent of the employees of his company, a regional branch of a major state-owned enterprise, were redundant—but because there were so few new contracts and profits were dwindling as a result.

Most Chinese nationals who moved to Ethiopia in the late 1990s and 2000s were involved in constructing infrastructure. Following Chinese engagement in the country’s emerging manufacturing industries and

1. There are quite a few studies on (ill-informed) depictions of Chinese involvement in Africa in Western media and popular discourse (see, e.g., Bräutigam 2015; Sautman and Yan 2009, 2014; Woods 2008; Yan and Sautman 2012).

Ethiopia's growing popularity as a port of call for Chinese tourists and youth volunteers, the Chinese community has diversified substantially over the past decade (Arkebe 2015; Bräutigam, Weis, and Tang 2018; Giannecchini and Taylor 2018; Mebratu, Wu, and Yang 2015; Tegegne 2007, 2009). Furthermore, Ethiopia's political centrality as host of the African Union has attracted diplomats, journalists, and students from China. The number of Chinese citizens in Ethiopia is estimated to lie between 20,000 and 40,000 (Cook et al. 2016, 62). However, in the popular imagination this figure is much higher. Ethiopians often described the arrival of the Chinese as sweeping, or even swamping. Ethiopian government regulations on foreign investment in the local economy are, however, stricter than in other African countries, prohibiting the Chinese, like other foreign nationals, from establishing businesses, such as the China shops and Chinese clinics that have emerged in other parts of Africa, unless they obtain a license through a local partner (see e.g., Bräutigam 2003; Dobler 2009, 2008; Haugen and Carling 2005; Hsu 2007; Lin 2014; Mohan et al. 2014).

While a slowdown in the construction industry in China has pushed companies and workers abroad, a building boom, especially in infrastructural development, has drawn them to Ethiopia, among other parts of Africa. With an average real economic growth of 11 percent since 2004, Ethiopia has been one of the fastest-growing economies in Africa (World Bank 2012, 1). Economic growth is driven by the services sector (5.3 percentage points), followed by the industries (2.8 percentage points), largely owing to a surge in construction projects (World Bank 2015, 1). The extension of the road network has been a government priority, as road development is believed to trigger other forms of development and prompt the transition from a predominantly agrarian to an industrialized economy, as anticipated in Ethiopia's first and second Growth and Transformation Plans.

Ethiopia has long been one of the countries with the lowest density of asphalt roads worldwide. With a limited budget at its disposal, the Ethiopian government sought to attract foreign capital and capacity-rich yet cheap contractors in order to extend the existing 49,000-kilometer road network of 2010–2011 to 136,000 kilometers by 2014–2015 and thereby to increase the road density from 44.5 to 123.7 kilometers per square kilometer. In addition to road transport, the Ethiopian government is planning to build up a full-fledged railway network (Ministry of Finance and Economic Development of Ethiopia 2010). On January 1, 2018, the USD 3.4 billion Chinese-built railway linking Addis Ababa and the port city of Djibouti was inaugurated by then prime minister Hailemariam Desalegn, replacing the long-defunct French railway. Some of the Chinese workers introduced in this book, including Yu Bohai, contributed to the construction of this 750 kilometers line after finishing the road project in Tigray where I first met them. Others are working on

the railway between Addis Ababa and Mekelle that is under construction at the time of writing.

Modern road building in Ethiopia began under Emperor Tewodros II (1855–1868) who employed Europeans and soldiers to construct roads (Pankhurst 1968). Tewodros was reputed to have participated in the construction work himself to overcome the soldiers' ingrained aversion to physical labor, due to the long-standing stigma on craftsmanship in Ethiopia. "From the early dawn to late at night Theodore [Tewodros] was himself at work; with his own hands he removed stones, levelled the ground or helped to fill up small ravines," one of the Emperor's captives wrote. "No one could leave so long as he was there himself; no one would think of eating or of rest, while the Emperor showed the example and shared the hardships" (Pankhurst 1968, 284). Emperor Menilek II (1889–1913) enjoyed a similar reputation as a "great road builder" who knew how to put "stone to shoulder" (288). Recognizing the strategic potential of roads, Menilek built a significant number of roads in the vicinity of Addis Abeba, and from the capital to the Gulf of Aden ports.²

In 1904, the local Armenian, Sarkis Terzian, imported the first steam roller, and in 1907, the first car made its entry in Ethiopia. During the reign of Menilek, Rasēs (comparable to dukes) served as main road builders, expanding the road network beyond the capital, such as Ras Makonnen, governor of Harar. He was responsible for the construction of a road from Dire Dawa to Harar, which was planned by the French engineers who built the railway from Djibouti to Addis Abeba between 1894 and 1917. Road construction intensified under the regency of Ras Tafari Makonnen, who would become Emperor Haile Selassie. He founded a Public Works Department in 1922 and devoted his attention to expanding the road network in and around Addis Abeba and make it more suitable for motorized traffic at a time in which the number of cars was increasing steadily. He did so with the help of European engineers and American machinery. In the wake of Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, the roads in the vicinity of the capital and those between the capital and the sea, had considerably improved (Pankhurst 1968).

"The Italians are back, but now with slit eyes," remarked an Ethiopian army veteran once, evoking memories of Italian efforts to expand the country's road network during their occupation of Ethiopia between 1936 and 1941. In this period Italy spent about USD 120 million on the construction of nearly 2,500 kilometers of roads, all of which were treated with macadam to accommodate heavy military transport. This network was extended

2. Although Emperor Yohannes IV (1871–1889), who originated from Tigray, played an important role in uniting Ethiopia (Levine 2000, 160), little road construction took place during his reign. A devout Orthodox Christian, Yohannes IV was said to be more interested in building churches than means of communication (Pankhurst 1968, 288).

with funds from the International Development Association of about USD 113 million in the 1950s and 1960s.³ The motorway programs set up and sponsored by the international community (see International Bank for Reconstruction and Development 1972, 1967, 1957, 1954) under the aegis of the International Development Bank in Washington (later the World Bank) seemed to be developed to facilitate the export of a single product: coffee beans. Whereas road construction during the period of Italian occupation served chiefly military purposes, American involvement in road development from 1950 onward implied a shift to the generation of commercial agriculture. The World Bank continued to fund road building during the 1980s and 1990s, when the Road Sector Development Project was inaugurated with the establishment of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.

The first Chinese-built road was the nearly 300-kilometer gravel road from Weldiya to Wereta in Amhara regional state, a stretch that the UN general road survey of 1969 had deemed to be of low priority (United Nations Development Programme 1969, 7). China committed to the construction of the road in an aid agreement signed by Emperor Haile Selassie and Premier Zhou Enlai in 1971, barely a year after the establishment of diplomatic relations between Ethiopia and Communist China; yet the work started only in 1975, after the Ethiopian Revolution. The road was finished in 1983. (The first and last sections of the road have been upgraded recently by Chinese companies.) The few Chinese who knew about the project described it as a genuine aid (*yuanjian*) project, in contrast to the projects carried out more recently.

The first Chinese company entered the Ethiopian construction market as a competitive contractor in 1997, embarking on the construction of the Addis Ababa Ring Road, a project sponsored by the World Bank. Chinese involvement in Ethiopia in the past two decades has, as in other African countries, centered on infrastructure development, filling the void left by traditional donors who shifted away from infrastructural construction to humanitarian aid (Bräutigam 2010). Chinese contractors in Ethiopia are estimated to have built about USD 6.5 billion worth of roads, totaling approximately 3000 kilometers.⁴ Most of these projects were paid for by the Ethiopian government and the International Development Association, and their construction was supervised by Ethiopian or international (e.g., Indian, Swiss) consultant companies. A handful of flagship projects, such as the Addis Ababa–Adama expressway, have been financed through Chinese loans.

Chinese involvement in African road-building sectors is striking for two reasons: the sheer number of projects taken up by Chinese contractors and the sudden arrival of a large number of Chinese nationals. As of 2010, fully 75

3. My calculation of data in Masresha (1970, 8).

4. My calculation of data in Alemayehu and Atenafu (2010, 20–21).

percent of the ongoing road projects in Ethiopia were carried out by Chinese companies, according to the Chinese embassy in Addis Ababa. The Chinese dominate road building in Ethiopia in another respect: individual projects commonly include more than a hundred Chinese expatriate citizens, in contrast with other foreign construction companies operating in the country, such as Italian, Turkish, Japanese, and Korean enterprises, which work with an expatriate staff of, at most, ten engineers.

About 13 percent of all the Chinese companies active in Ethiopia are state-owned, yet these companies are the biggest and employ the largest number of both Chinese and Ethiopians (World Bank 2012, 11). In the face of their growing internationalization, Chinese state-owned enterprises have come to compete against each other (Gonzalez-Vicente 2011, 406). This is also relevant in the Ethiopian construction sector. Whereas connections play an important role in the allocation of projects in the domestic market, in Ethiopia, generally the lowest bidder wins projects funded by public money or the World Bank. Most loans extended to Ethiopia by the Chinese government or the China-Africa Development Fund are, however, conditional upon noncompetitive single sourcing from China. Whereas large-scale state-owned enterprises with international licenses normally act as main contractors, they subcontract smaller provincial or city-level state-owned enterprises and privately owned enterprises.

Chinese companies have outcompeted Korean, Middle Eastern, European, and local companies because they were willing to carry out projects for a low price. "If this camp were an American or European camp, it would be big and beautiful. The Chinese keep it simple. They can sleep on the asphalt, if they have to," an Ethiopian work inspector once remarked while we drove past a Chinese compound. Savings on wages, equipment, housing, and construction materials have allowed Chinese companies to keep their costs low.

More importantly, Chinese state-owned enterprises are backed by company savings and state bank loans (Morck, Yeung, and Zhao 2008). "Chinese taxpayers are paying the African bill," one Chinese respondent remarked. By contrast, Ethiopian companies with small budgets have to abort building works if they go over cost. With access to seemingly unrestricted capital, Chinese companies have sufficient capacity in both labor and machinery to continue works even if they incur a loss. A share of the government-funded projects in fact did.

Xie Yang, manager of a project in southern Ethiopia that was losing up to 40 percent on the contract price, saw road building in Ethiopia as a learning process for which the Chinese had to "pay tuition fees." Chinese contractors in Ethiopia stumbled upon many obstacles, such as limited budgets, shortages of building materials and resources, in Xie's words "unreasonable

design specifications,” and difficulties with cross-cultural communication. And yet, despite significant losses, the Chinese contractors continued, in order to uphold “the reputation of the company and the dignity of the Chinese.” Perhaps more to the point, once on board it was difficult to abandon ship. Companies had made a considerable initial investment in equipment, transportation, and mobilization. Recouping these investments required them to stay and try their luck on the next project; eat bitterness and get on in the hope for a rosier future.

Fashioning workers

Tolo, tolo—“quick, quick” in Amharic—was the most repeated injunction on the building site. It was used by Chinese managers to exhort Ethiopian workers, urging them to speed up their work. Conveying irritation, or even exasperation, the word *tolo*, as it was used by Chinese managers, expressed the intricate sentiments that they held about their Ethiopian laborers and their life and work in Ethiopia more generally. Complaints abounded. The expatriate management held Ethiopian laborers accountable for holding up the building work and driving up production costs, even if their modest salaries made up a negligible share of the overall cost. Chinese foremen routinely called local workers lazy, aimless, and unwilling to work. The Ethiopians lacked that same desire to improve their lives that, they believed, had propelled four decades of rapid economic growth in China and helped bring the country back on track with the world after the Cultural Revolution.

To understand Chinese attitudes toward Ethiopian workers and labor more generally, we should take into consideration their experiences at home. Most of them had been rural migrants in urban China who had fueled the country’s growth engine with their cheap and assiduous labor, or they were the children of that generation and had seen their sacrifices and determination up close. Subjected to a new form of governance that the reformist Chinese state cultivated in an effort to push for a shift from a planned to a market economy, both generations had been inculcated with a sense of their duty to work hard, coupled with a willingness to make sacrifices. Central to the state-led market reforms was the cultivation of a secular form of asceticism, a practice that entailed the rigorous abstention from self-indulgence in the name of development. Asceticism came to be seen, by the state and the individual alike, as a main prerequisite for driving social and economic development. The heightened self-cultivation of mind and body intrinsic to it was essential to the demands of the precarious labor regime that enabled China to become the factory of the world (e.g., Pun 2005; H. Yan 2003).

In *The Dragon’s Gift* (2009), Deborah Bräutigam shows how China’s development assistance to African countries is marked by its own experience of

development during the economic reform period, when Japan and Western nations provided turnkey investment, along with loans, technology, and expertise, in exchange for resources, mainly oil. Chinese development blueprints in Africa, such as the Angola model, the supposedly uniquely Chinese model of oil-backed loans for infrastructure, in fact repeat patterns of foreign investment in mainland China throughout the 1980s and 1990s. In this book, I would like to extend Bräutigam's plea to compare development in China with Chinese development overseas. Apart from development strategies and policies, perceptions of development and the epistemological assumptions on which they are based are repeated and rehearsed as well.

Decades of unprecedented economic growth in China account for a vested belief of Chinese citizens in the power of markets and neoliberal subjectivity as a precondition for wealth generation. The development discourse that workers brought with them to Ethiopia bears striking similarities to what James Ferguson calls the productionist premise (2015, 36) of Western approaches to development that emphasize productivity over the production process itself—including putting people to work—and thereby fail to take into account a reality in which most people are excluded from the production system in the first place. The Chinese productionist premise and what we may call the productivist promise—the enchantment with productivity and its fruits—are, however, based on the distinct foundation of top-down state-led development. The model of the developmental state, passionately endorsed by the late prime minister of Ethiopia, Meles Zenawi (2011), and his successors, has been viewed as the foundation of China's economic miracle and continues to inform the country's economic policies overseas.

Since the start of China's reforms, countless government campaigns, especially those aimed at raising the *suzhi* (quality) of the population (Kipnis 2006; Murphy 2004; H. Yan 2003), have articulated the idea that productivity is the responsibility, or even duty, of all citizens. The pro-market reforms prompted a shift in public discourse, emphasizing the need for individuals to distinguish themselves and grasp life with both hands (Ong and Li 2008). This change in discourse went hand in hand with a radical transfer of responsibility—and risk—from state institutions to the individual. Entrepreneurialism and diligence were believed to be crucial to stimulating the economy, as was individual freedom, if restricted to the socioeconomic realm (X. Zhang 2008). One's position in society came to be seen as reflecting one's achievement and ability, rather than unfortunate class origins, as was thought under Mao Zedong's regime, or disadvantageous government policies. Government campaigns calling citizens to improve the self and society found traction, as many citizens saw their productivity generously rewarded.

Much like their counterparts at home, the Chinese workers in Ethiopia credited the present state of their country to the blood, toil, sweat, and tears of individuals motivated to improve their lives and society as a whole. Development was, in their eyes, a collective rather than an individual endeavor. This explains their chagrin with the supposed indolence of Ethiopian workers, which they took as a sign of their irresponsibility. When productivity is considered to be a social responsibility, unproductivity is by implication shameful. Some Chinese workers characterized Ethiopian men as having lost their self-respect. Coming from a country with ample employment opportunities, the Chinese rarely question the availability of employment in Africa. Much in line with the Western productionist premise, they saw redistribution of wealth as futile or even counterproductive, for it cultivates a “greedy character” and makes Africans “naturally hold out a hand and ask for money,” as a Chinese interlocutor phrased it.

Even if they were modest about their own ability, the Chinese I met in Ethiopia believed they had a strong duty to impart discipline and instill in their Ethiopian workers a will to improve (cf. Li 2007). As such, they resemble the figure of the Han “constructor” (*jianshezhe*) in Xinjiang province described by Tom Cliff (2016). Priding themselves as harbingers of development in what they view as one of China’s backward outposts, Han constructors are involved in more than physical labor. For them, construction is part of a broader project of social and cultural transformation (27), the success of which is measured by the quality of the habitat, the habits, and the habitus of the population (34). In order to achieve all-round civilization, Chinese reformers believed that the improvement of material conditions in society should be accompanied by the enhancement of people’s morality and the cultivation of their moral consciousness (Bakken 2000). Much like their counterparts in Xinjiang, the Chinese workers in Ethiopia believed they were well equipped to demonstrate what development entails. When their convictions met with little response, as they often did, they turned to the ethnographer for confirmation: “You have been to China. You have seen how developed China is compared to Africa, haven’t you?”

Development was viewed by my interlocutors not only as the hard truth, as Deng Xiaoping had it, and therefore a necessity, but also as a privilege or an exclusive opportunity provided by generous Chinese gifts. In *Taming Tibet* (2013) Emily Yeh demonstrates how China’s legitimation of its sovereignty over Tibet rests on the presumption that Tibetans are grateful for the bestowal of the gift of development in the form of government subsidies and investment in large-scale infrastructure, agriculture, and housing. She shows how culturally specific idioms of development shape its political and economic outcomes. The ways in which the expansionist Chinese state fashions Tibetan citizens as subjects who desire development are reminiscent

of the ways in which the Chinese developers expect Ethiopians to welcome their initiatives and guidance.

Whereas Chinese claims of sovereignty over Tibet are founded on the argument that Tibetans are part of a larger Chinese family, the Han majority being the “big brother,” it is harder to use claims of kinship in Africa. The Chinese government, however, continues to fall back on historical narratives of Third World solidarity, inspired by the principles of peaceful coexistence drawn up at the Bandung Conference in 1955 (Alden and Large 2011; Cooley 1965; Institute of Pacific Relations 1955). While appealing to a common past as victims of European colonialism and a shared experience as developing countries, China simultaneously prides itself for its newly gained glory, or *guangrong* (*guang* means “brilliant,” *rong* “honor”), to justify its role in leading the way. China’s ambivalent position as equal and superior is however questioned and challenged on the ground.

Disciplining management

As Frederick Cooper (1997, 80) remarks in his study on Zanzibari and Kenyan plantation workers in the colonial period, “work discipline is part of a structure, not a habit.” Worker defiance is often a response to managerial caprice. On Chinese-run road building sites in Ethiopia, efforts to discipline the local workers frequently proved counterproductive. Ethiopian workers have become skilled at resisting management, so much so that they themselves were able to discipline the Chinese managers, who were forced to improve labor conditions over work contracts, wage levels, and punishments. On some occasions workers even came to make expatriate managers look foolish. Importantly, the Ethiopian workers could rely on the support of local civic authorities, such as the police and the town administration. More significantly, they had the law on their side. The ruling of the judges at *wereda* courts,⁵ the lowest-level state courts in Ethiopia, discriminated in

5. *Weredas* are third-level districts that follow regions (Am. *kililoch*, sing. *kilil*) and zones (Am. *zonoch*, sing. *zon*), and precede *kebeles*, the lowest-level government units. Ethiopia has a dual judicial system that is made up of two parallel, separately functioning, court structures, on the federal and state level respectively. Supreme federal judicial authority is vested in the Federal Supreme Court in Addis Abeba. Until recently, only the federal cities of Addis Abeba and Dire Dawa housed Federal High Courts and First Instance Courts. There are also three levels of state courts: the State Supreme Court, the State High Courts, and the First Instance Courts. State Supreme Courts sit in the capital cities of the respective states and bear final judicial authority over matters that concern State law and jurisdiction (Girmachew 2010). In Tigray, the State Supreme Court is based in Mekelle. The nearest State High Court sat in Maychew, while Alamata, Mehoni, and Hewane, the three towns of my field site, all housed First Instance Courts that dealt with a growing number of lawsuits involving Chinese companies and nationals. State First Instance Courts are commonly referred to as *wereda* courts. I use this term throughout the book.

favor of the local workforce, at least so Chinese managers believed. Ethiopian workers increasingly came to fight their employers not only on the construction site but also in the courtroom—with considerable success. The ad hoc coalitions that evolved between workers, village and town residents, and civic and legal authorities, increased the leverage of local laborers vis-à-vis their Chinese employers and boosted their morale.

Many have argued that African actors, whether they are political elites, civil servants, small entrepreneurs, or ordinary workers, are drawing the short straw in their encounters with the Chinese. More recently, however, a number of scholars have pointed out the agency that Africans exert in their interactions with Chinese (Alden 2007; Bodomo 2009; Cheru 2016; Moyo 2010). Far from being a passive space that is increasingly subject to intervention by China, Africa is a contested terrain, where Chinese actors are constantly challenged (Corkin 2013; Lee 2017; Mohan and Lampert 2013; Soulé-Kohndou 2018). Of course, we should be wary of romanticizing resistance (Abu-Lughod 1990), especially when taking into consideration the Ethiopian rank-and-file workers of Chinese multinational enterprises. Indeed, Chinese involvement in the African construction sector has produced new dependencies (Brooks 2010; French 2014; Nielsen 2013). In this book, however, I seek to highlight the leverage of Ethiopian actors in negotiating labor conditions and, more importantly, the circumstances and mechanisms that worked to enhance their leverage vis-à-vis their Chinese employers. At the other end, I look at the Chinese response, which is revealing of the lack of agency they perceive to possess.

Why were the Ethiopian laborers able to negotiate working conditions so boldly and effectively? And why were the expatriate managers forced to give in to workers' demands? The leverage of the workers seems remarkable, given that the construction industry is one of the most precarious sectors worldwide. Casualization is rampant, and the lack of unionization places construction workers in an extremely vulnerable position, especially in racialized corporate structures. Most Chinese construction companies in Ethiopia work with an all-expatriate management. Ethiopians, both natives to the region and workers who hail from other parts of the country, take up the manual, unskilled, and semiskilled jobs. The racial glass ceiling mostly prevents them from attaining management positions higher than that of foreman. Despite the casualized and racialized labor regime on construction sites, however, there are factors inherent in road building that increased the agency of Ethiopian workers.

Road-building sites are publicly accessible—indeed, Chinese construction activities in southeastern Tigray drew many curious spectators from surrounding settlements—and abusive labor practices were thus to a large extent visible to the public and condemned collectively as a result. Ethiopian

workers, a significant number of whom are members of the local community, built alliances with local residents in their attempts to resist Chinese management. They were often successful, and worker resistance was thus nestled in local communal structures.

Despite the lack of trade unions or any other support structures, Ethiopian workers proved to be remarkably successful in challenging the expatriate managers and improving their working lives as a result. Labor resistance and protest covered the broad spectrum from subtle transgressions to strikes, even if the latter remained restricted to single companies. The local builders' most effective leverage against their Chinese employers was the collective withdrawal of labor, even though work stoppages commonly did not last longer than a day.

On the construction site, the Chinese managers were often challenged from *within*, that is, with the same discursive tools and methods that were used to discipline the local workforce. The laborers appropriated the ideas and concepts that had been introduced by management itself to implement labor discipline and used these against management. While the managers pushed casualization to extremes, by replacing a worker after the slightest confrontation, laborers copied them by voting with their feet, leaving one company for another. This strategy forced the Chinese companies to increase wages, as they sought to retain good workers.

In the courtroom the workers proved even more successful in fighting their Chinese superiors. The *wereda* courts not only routinely ruled against the Chinese expatriates, regardless of the evidence presented in court, they also created awareness among workers of their labor rights and among the Chinese managers of their obligations as employers over issues such as employment contracts, severance and overtime payments, and dismissal procedures. Faced with a soaring number of lawsuits filed against them, the Chinese were stupefied. In addition to this, the *wereda* courts and town administrations turned a blind eye to—and thereby effectively legitimized—the workers' subversive activities, such as pilfering. This went against the expatriate managers' ideas about the local state and its expected support for local industries. This attitude is not surprising when we take into consideration the situation in mainland China, where powerful coalitions exist between county and municipal governments on the one hand and industries on the other.

Resentment of Chinese labor practices, coupled with more general anti-Chinese sentiment, then, spurred the creation of both ad hoc and more long-term coalitions between workers, local residents, and the authorities in an effort to resist malfeasance. Whereas the interests of the central government and the Ethiopian Roads Authority in Addis Ababa dovetailed with the Chinese push for more discipline, the interests of local authorities converged

with those of the workers on these matters. Consequently, Chinese involvement prompted divisions between central and local authorities.

The most common responses of the Chinese managers to forms of defiance, especially when they concerned coalitions with state institutions, were acquiescence and compromise. Often the Chinese could not change a situation to their advantage. For one thing, they lacked the authority to intervene. This meant that the best solution, from their perspective, was simply to swallow their anger and remain silent. At least in this way they could save face, safeguard their credibility, or prevent more harm from befalling their reputation. As workers grew bolder and alliances among various actors in the local community stronger, the Chinese managers were compelled to give way over contractual arrangements, working times, advances on salaries, and medical expense coverage. Far from being unblemished, the honor derived from “helping the Africans develop” thus had a distinctly bitter taste, as the Chinese found their generosity unreciprocated. However, as the fraught encounters with the Ethiopians left a bitter flavor, so too did divisions within the Chinese road-building community.

Rescuing Chineseness

The Chinese road-building communities in Ethiopia were riddled with hierarchies and divisions. Differentiation occurred on many levels, starting with the type of sector in which Chinese workers were employed, the company for which they worked, the contract under which they were appointed, and the nature of their job. In daily life, the distinction between Chinese companies was expressed by referring to the quality of what was called *daiyu*, meaning “treatment,” broadly defined. The concept of *daiyu* was taken to indicate the level of salary, yet it also implied economic and social benefits and employment security, as well as the status of the living conditions offered by employers. The respondents unanimously agreed that in Africa the *daiyu* of Chinese state-owned companies was better than, and preferable to, that of private enterprises.

Within companies there were also dividing lines. The older generation of Chinese workers, who ranked higher in the company hierarchy, were quick to point out the differences between temporary, project-based staff, whom they called peasant workers (*nongmingong*) and permanent employees, or “people of our work unit” (*women danwei de ren*). Although the peasant workers were Chinese, they were not considered part of the work unit, despite the fact that they had sometimes worked up to 7 or 8 years for the company. Permanent employees commonly hailed from urban regions or had enjoyed a higher education, whereas the peasant workers came from rural backgrounds. This separation reflects the rural-urban divide in China, which was transported

overseas and found expression in all spheres of life in Ethiopia. The number of peasant workers hired by state-owned enterprises was, however, small. Most of them worked for private subcontractors.

Chinese workers from poor rural backgrounds under a temporary contract with private construction companies—somewhat pejoratively referred to as the *dalaocu* (big old ruffians) by their superiors—were seen as threats to the reputations of civilized and cultured Chinese. Sharing food with local families, speaking regional vernaculars, and pursuing intimate relations with Ethiopian women, these workers became the main target of occasional civilizing offensives initiated by the project management. Chinese workers were allowed to straddle ethnic (or racial) boundaries, that is, to taste the food of the other, yet not too greedily, and speak the other's language, but not too fluently. Sexual intercourse was another matter, for this form of intimacy annulled the social and racial distances between “us” (the Chinese) and “them” (the Ethiopians) that were so carefully protected by the high-level managers. They attempted to retain the positive image (*xingxiang*) of the Chinese community, if often in vain. Their preoccupation with reputation derived from lingering anxieties about the potential contamination of Chinese integrity in the dual sense of the word, as the quality of having strong moral principles and as the condition of being undivided.

Narratives of China's overseas development are intimately connected with the emphasis on improving the *suzhi* (quality) of the Chinese population and the project of building material and spiritual civilization at home, as Nyíri Pál (2006, 2013) illustrates. The *suzhi* of the Chinese was cast in a more favorable light than that of the Ethiopians, who came to serve as the background against which their Chinese counterparts were able to see themselves as more advanced and affluent, more refined and knowledgeable, thereby boosting their pride in a common Chinese identity. Even if Chinese road builders in Ethiopia had to a certain extent lost out on development at home, they expressed strong nationalist sentiments. The patriotism emanating from the grand narratives of Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative has only further boosted their confidence and has, more importantly, instilled in them a sense of purpose.

The chasm between the dominant rhetoric of unity and solidarity and the underlying concern with the reality of sharp social divisions marked the lives of Chinese workers in Ethiopia. Anxieties produced by what Ann Laura Stoler (2009, 1997, 1989) calls the “interior frontier” in the context of the colonial Dutch Indies did not derive only from an in-between category of mixed-race babies, or *métissage* in the historical trajectory described by Stoler, but also by a category of Han Chinese who were regarded as inferior and impure, based on class-based categories and connotations transported to Ethiopia. Social stratification within the Chinese migrant community was

to a large extent based on socioeconomic divisions originating in Chinese society; divisions that were put to the test in daily interactions with the Ethiopian host community. The tension between, on the one hand, the promotion of a single identity—a common Chineseness—and, on the other hand, the exclusionary rhetoric that prevailed in informal narratives among road workers, came to influence Chinese interactions with Ethiopians and taint their feelings of accomplishment.

Speaking bitterness

Bitterness was a common sentiment expressed by Chinese managers on the construction site and in the private quarters of residential compounds. Narratives of bitterness were made in a variety of registers, conveying sorrow, frustration, and occasionally wrath, but also pride and confidence. On the one hand, narratives of suffering—or speaking bitterness (*suku*)—sought to explain the limited success of the Chinese projects in Ethiopia. Alluding to the apparent hostility of the local people, they spoke of laborers, residents, and authorities as thwarting, or worse, sabotaging Chinese benevolence. The bitterness tasted and expressed by Chinese workers can be explained by the felt disjuncture between their hopes and the circumstances they faced on the ground, in particular, the lack of gratitude on the part of the Ethiopians. On the other hand, tales of hardship could bear a distinctly positive connotation, in particular, when they suggested that the ability to eat bitterness was part of Chinese identity. Personal disappointment was, then, turned into self-sacrifice and a form of national pride. This idea is reproduced in the Chinese state media, which remind workers of their patriotic duties and praise them in return for transferring China's glory, or *guangrong*, overseas.

For one thing, their ability to endure hardships was seen to set them apart from the Ethiopians. Used in a comparative perspective, the moralistic tone of speaking bitterness draws a boundary between the Chinese managers and Ethiopian workers that muddles, or even legitimates, the at times denigrating attitude of managers toward their Ethiopian laborers (cf. Lee 2017). "Ethiopians don't know how to eat bitterness" was a repeated comment on the apparent indolence of Ethiopian workers and their supposed inability to defer gratification, one of the key values of asceticism. "In the evenings they drink away the salaries they earn during the day." Labor was about saving rather than spending money, the Chinese believed; a view that is not surprising given that the reason for them to work abroad was to save money. The Chinese managers wanted the Ethiopian workers to eat bitterness, or at least make sacrifices, if not for the company and the construction work, then at least in the name of development. Only then would they be able to cast off abject poverty.

Eating bitterness, on the flip side, demands full submission to company discipline. As Ching Kwan Lee (2017) in her work on Chinese mine workers in Zambia notes, eating bitterness is composed of a “combination of individual moral compulsion with corporate control imperatives” (53), and it resonates with Max Weber’s depiction of inner-worldly asceticism, the focus of people on attitudes and activities that lead to salvation. Inner-worldly asceticism, as preached in Protestantism, teaches that the fulfillment of obligations in the world is the main, if not the only, method of proving one’s (religious) merit. The asceticism embraced by Chinese workers in Ethiopia holds that the dutiful and diligent fulfillment of obligations is the principal way of proving individual and, more importantly, collective value. Asceticism, in other words, entailed personal sacrifice with an eye to achieving collective salvation.

However, eating bitterness was not just part of the management culture. It was the very foundation of migrant life in Ethiopia that lent value to the migrants’ projects. By eating and speaking bitterness, Chinese workers hoped to gain respect not only from Ethiopians but also from those at home. The discourse construed their activities in Ethiopia as a virtuous sacrifice for the Chinese nation and for development at large. As the public image of Chinese workers overseas has been distorted from that of brave and noble representatives of the nation into men who move to Africa to pan for gold (*taojin*), workers sought to retain their recognition and dignity. In the popular Chinese imagination, Africa is commonly classified as poor and backward, and moving there is not held in particularly high regard. To a certain extent, the discourse of eating bitterness added virtue, if not value, to their endeavor.

Road work

Set in rural southeastern Tigray, the book follows a road under construction by a Chinese contractor, which I call RCE, from mid-2008 to early 2013. RCE, a national state-owned enterprise, had subcontracted a large part of the work to six Chinese companies: five private enterprises from the provinces Fujian (two), Hebei, Shandong, and Liaoning, and one provincial state-owned company from Heilongjiang, as well as a number of smaller Ethiopian companies from Addis Ababa and Mekelle, the capital of the Tigray region. The road works were supervised by two Ethiopian consultant firms in a joint venture and funded by the Ethiopian government and the European Commission. All managers, down to the on-site foremen, were Chinese, with approximately 120 men and five women in total (as of March 2012). Most of the physical labor was carried out by Ethiopians, varying from workers with little or no skill or experience, to skilled workers such as machine operators, masons, and carpenters. Unskilled laborers were mainly drawn from towns

645,000,000 (including value-added tax).⁶ The slope gradients and curve radii of the existing gravel road were too steep and too short, respectively, and needed adjustment, but complying with the Ethiopian Roads Authority's specifications would entail extra work and prove to be a drain on the contractors' limited budget. After more than a year, both parties gave in to reach a compromise. "We have learned a lot from Alamata," acknowledged the deputy director of the Ethiopian Roads Authority's Design and Build Department. He pointed at the overview design of the Addis Ababa–Adama motorway that graced the wall of the general office of his department. "Have you heard of the new expressway from Addis Ababa to Adama? That road is also under construction by the Chinese. Perhaps you should have a look at that project." This motorway was to become a success story: for 57 percent funded with a loan from the Export-Import Bank of China, the budget was high, as were the stakes, and the media were on top of the project, which gave the Chinese contractor an extra push to finish the works before the date stipulated in the contract. In contrast, the Alamata–Hewane road project was a painful learning experience, being the first design-and-build project for the employer as well as for the Chinese contractor.

Traversing the northern part of Raya, a region that covers the very north of Amhara and the very south of Tigray, the project road runs in the direction of Mekelle City. The route from Alamata to Hewane had been a gravel road constructed as a detour for the Alamata–Betemara section of the Addis Ababa–Aksum road, the main north-south axis of the country, which was being upgraded at the time. After completion, though, the detour proved to be more popular than the main asphalt road, in particular for drivers of heavy trucks and trailers, who preferred to circumvent the steep slopes and hairpin curves of Mount Gera Kahsu. (Different stories account for the name of this infamous mountain: some say it was the name of a wealthy man; others claim it was a curse shouted by an Italian engineer who absent-mindedly let a concrete pipe roll down the slope.) For this reason, the Ethiopian Roads Authority decided to upgrade the detour to a DS-4 asphalt concrete road with a single asphalt layer (5 cm) and two carriageways (7 m each).⁷

6. In January 2012, ETB 1 equaled USD 0.05 (or USD 1 equaled ETB 17.29). Since the end of my field research the Chinese Yuan (CNY) has appreciated and the ETB has depreciated against the USD. My respondents were well aware of the exchange rates and the fluctuating value of currencies.

7. DS-4 stands for Design Standard 4. At the time of research, there were ten design standards in Ethiopia, running from Design Standard 1 (DS-1), for roads that accommodate an Average Daily Traffic of 10,000–15,000 to DS-10, for rural roads that accommodate an Average Daily Traffic up to 15. The width of the road and the surface type are defined accordingly. Roads with a Design Standard running from 1 to 4 have an asphalt surface, while DS-5 to DS-8 roads have a gravel surface. DS-9 and DS-10 roads are made of earth, and are administered by the *wereda* road offices. DS-1 to DS-5 are administered by the federal road authorities, while the remaining roads (DS-6 to DS-8) fall under the regional road authorities. For a

From Alamata, the starting point, the road crosses the Raya plain, curving around the mountains, then climbing into the mountains until its end just before the town of Hewane. The borders of Raya, I was told, did not correspond with the borders that had been drawn up when the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia was established in 1991, yet the people of Raya shared a common origin, language, and culture. The road runs through three rural *weredas*: Raya Alamata, Raya Azebo, and Hintalo Wajirat, and one urban *wereda*, Alamata town. Together, a total population of 463,760 lived in these four *weredas* (Central Statistical Agency of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 2012). The district was predominantly rural. Raya Azebo, for instance, with Mehoni town as administrative center, had a population of circa 150,000, whereas the town itself numbered only about 15,000 residents (interview, Raya Azebo *wereda* administration, January 25, 2012). The towns, then, were dependent on road traffic and the services provided to the surrounding rural areas.

With a population of approximately 40,000, Alamata was the largest town along the project road (interview, Alamata *wereda* administration, May 18, 2012). Established by the Italians in 1936, Alamata had begun as a road-builders' camp for the Italian construction firm Azienda Autonomia Statale della Strada and the Italian military (Tsega-Ab 2000, 22), situated on a plain south of the mountain foothills. Alamata became an important stop on La Strada della Vittoria (The Road of Victory) built by the Italians during the occupation. In 1938, the town counted 1,850 inhabitants and was the major settlement in the region. Mehoni had at that time a population of 560 (35).

After the Italian interregnum, the new administration of Emperor Haile Selassie faced stiff resistance in this part of Tigray, and, even now, the attitude of the area's inhabitants toward the central government in Addis Ababa remains ambivalent, despite the fact that the governing party hails from Tigray. The Chinese had thus entered a region marked by historic tensions between local communities and the central state.

Political tensions were woven into the fabric of the region as early as 1943, when a coalition of peasants, bandits, and members of the aristocracy who saw their autonomous position under threat by the Imperial regime initiated a rebellion known as the Weyane rebellion (Gebru 1984; Young 1998). Taking place off the main road (in the region crossed by the project road), the revolt was crushed that same year by the central government, aided by the British Royal Air Force, resulting in the confiscation of land by the state (Aregawi 2004). In 1953, after a series of disputes between former landowners and purchasers, the Imperial government decided to return the lands (Tsega-Ab 2000, 44–46). Even so, the central administration remained

detailed and informative discussion on the construction and administration of lower-level roads in Ethiopia, see the work of Rony Emmenegger (2012, 2016).

discredited in the region, not least because the new taxes were much higher than they had been under the Italians (Erlich 1981, 217).

Then, in the 1980s Alamata became a stronghold of the Derg, the Marxist-inspired regime that took power following the ousting of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974, which tried to hold onto the towns along the main road (Hammond 2002, 97). Meanwhile, areas farther off, such as Azebo and Mehoni town, fell into the hands of the Tigray People's Liberation Front in 1981. The Tigray People's Liberation Front fought against the Derg regime and Amhara dominance (Aregawi 2004; Donham 1999; Young 1998). Alamata became the scene of an important battle and fell into the hands of the Tigray People's Liberation Front as late as 1989 (Tsega-Ab 2000, 69).

Together with the state, Chinese companies were the major employers in the Raya region, where most of the population live off agriculture. Rayans told me with pride that their region was the most fertile in Tigray, growing maize, sugarcane, sorghum, and teff⁸ as the main crops. Most of the peasants were smallholders. The national and international markets' reach into the area was limited, in contrast to more fertile regions in Oromia and Gambella in southern Ethiopia. There was one livestock farm along the project road that produced exports for the Middle East. Another large fruit and vegetable farm run by an expatriate British citizen of Indian origin was situated 15 kilometers off the road. In the past this region had also produced cotton for the Italian-founded cotton ginning factory in Alamata. Rumor had it that the factory had been seized by the central government of Emperor Haile Selassie to punish defiant Tigrayans and was sold to Jimma in the southwest of Ethiopia (Tsega-Ab 2000, 46). Despite the land's fertility and suitability for agriculture, the region's history has been marked by droughts and famines, most notably in 1965–1966, 1973–1974, and 1984–1985 (63). In response to these famines, the Derg regime resettled inhabitants from Raya and adjacent areas to places in southwestern Ethiopia (Pankhurst 1992).

People in the region commonly identify themselves along religious lines. Although Tigray is largely Orthodox Christian—more than 4.1 million of the 4.3 million Tigrayans are Orthodox Christian (Central Statistical Agency of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 2007)—a large number of the nearly 171,000 Muslims in Tigray live in Raya. The Muslims in the region share an Oromo origin. The names of the villages along the project road, such as Ta'a and Kukufto, are reminiscent of the Oromo pastoralist settlements on the Raya Plain that date to the sixteenth century, when their livelihood was dependent on raising cattle and camels (Gebru 1984, 83). An Ethiopian laboratory technician noted that there were still a number of

8. Teff is an African cereal cultivated chiefly in Ethiopia and used to make flour for *injera*, a sourdough-risen flatbread with a spongy texture that is consumed in Ethiopia and Eritrea, and among Ethiopians and Eritreans in diaspora.

people in Kukufto town who could speak Oromiffa. Muslim pastoralists in the heart of this Orthodox Christian area were often raided and fought by monarchs such as Emperor Yohannes IV (1871–1889) (Tsega-Ab 2000, 5–7). To this day, the pastoralists remain unpopular. Town administrators I interviewed, for instance, saw the Muslims in their region as a nuisance, contending somewhat indignantly that they were generally disloyal. They were different from the peoples of Saudi Arabia who had arrived in Ethiopia in the seventh century, I was told by a former history teacher who had a post in the Raya Alamata *wereda* administration. He contended that the Muslims in Raya were impure, or in his words, “not proper Muslims.”

The second-largest town on the project road was Mehoni, referred to by the Chinese as Maoni or simply as *zhen* (township). The administrative center of Raya Azebo *wereda*, Mehoni was argued to have taken the place of Korem on the old Italian-built route as an inn for truck drivers on the way to Mekelle and farther on to Aksum. With its strategic placement—a day’s ride from Addis Ababa—and with the arrival of asphalt in March 2012, Mehoni was transformed into a medium-sized road town in a relatively short time and is likely to continue to grow as a stop on the new Weldiya–Mekelle railway.

Farther north, the road leaves the plain and starts to climb at kilometer 58, passing Adiqey (kilometer 86), and the highest point of the project road at an altitude of 2,636 meters, at the village of Adimesno (kilometer 95). The difference in climate between Adimesno and the lowest point of the road, close to Alamata, with an altitude of 1,446 meters, was palpable. The project road joins the main (Italian-built) road again after 116 kilometers. At the junction, the end of the road close to Hewane town, a board had been posted advising drivers to use the main road. Few complied, especially drivers of large trucks and trailers for whom the old route was a headache. Minibuses, however, continued to travel along the old route, as more people, and thus more customers, lived along that road.

Although the book is mainly based on 10 months of field research in Tigray in 2011 and 2012, it also draws from research in Addis Ababa, where I followed the construction of the Ring Road Project Phase 3 in 2011, and the Southern Peoples, Nations, and Nationalities Region in southwestern Ethiopia, where I observed a road under construction in 2017. I spent time and conducted interviews with the Chinese involved in road building up and down the corporate hierarchy, including project managers, engineers, draftsmen, contract managers, surveyors, mechanics, service personnel, and foremen on site, as well as the Ethiopian employees of the Chinese construction companies and the Ethiopian engineers employed by the Ethiopian Roads Authority or Ethiopian consultant firms that supervised the roadworks, and I accompanied them to the construction site. To protect

the identity of my respondents, I use pseudonyms for the names of both individuals and companies, and occasionally altered distinguishing details about them. Because of the importance of geographic locations in my study, geographical names have been left unchanged. During my time in Tigray I spent almost the same amount of time living in the Chinese and Ethiopian compounds.

Furthermore, I went through documents,⁹ including contract documents, monthly progress reports, and correspondence between the client, contractor, and consultant. Road-building projects typically involve three main parties: the client (often referred to as “the employer”), who commissions the contractor to carry out the construction work and who employs the consultant, the client’s representative on site, to supervise the works with respect to quality, time, costs, and general building practices.

The Chinese road builders worked 7 days a week, from 7 in the morning to 6:30 at night. As a consequence, recorded interviews raised practical difficulties. After a quick dinner in the camp canteen, they retired to their rooms for a rest, to watch a TV series, or to play video games. Or they disappeared into the table tennis room. Apart from a series of structured interviews I conducted in the late evenings, I gathered most of the data from casual conversations in cars and on construction sites replete with the sometimes overwhelming sound of excavators and road rollers, and exposed to the sun. “You get darker day by day,” kidded an Ethiopian friend once when I returned to Addis Ababa: “You are starting to look like the Chinese on the construction site.”

Another practical difficulty was mobility, or rather the lack thereof. With more than 100 kilometers to cover in my field site, traveling became a major concern. The fact that I did not have a car turned out to be an unexpected advantage as much as an expected disadvantage. By hitching rides I gained access to people on the road. I chatted with the drivers and fellow passengers of Bajajs,¹⁰ pickups, land cruisers, Isuzus, dump trucks, trailers, minibuses, and horse carts: all men. (I only rarely spotted a female driver and that was in urban Ethiopia.) Hitching rides from the camps to the building sites also enabled me to talk to the Chinese workers, who spent their only free hours and relaxing moments on a busy working day in their air-conditioned cars. A recurring issue, however, was the simultaneity of events. Due to my limited mobility, I could not simply go from one event at kilometer 103 to another at kilometer 14. I was forced to make choices.

9. The (untranslated) documents that appear in this study have been reproduced exactly as they appear in the original, errors included.

10. The Bajaj is a three-wheeler imported from India and used for passenger transport. Bajaj is the name of the Indian manufacturer. For an excellent discussion of the Bajaj system in urban Ethiopia, see Mains and Kinfu (2017).

Thanks to my respondents, I learned to think and talk in kilometers. Not only distances but also locations were perceived and expressed in kilometers. The often-posed questions “Where are you?” or “Where are you going?” was answered accordingly, with “I am at kilometer such-and-such” or “I am going to kilometer such-and-such.” On my first day I was informed that the asphalt had reached kilometer 18, the base course was approaching kilometer 8, and the subbase had entered Alamata town at kilometer 1 plus 800 (meters). After becoming familiar with the pace of different construction works—the project’s asphalt works, for instance, moved at about the rate of a kilometer a day—I developed a sense of which works were happening where, and at which kilometer.

After a few months I also got on reasonably well with the engineer’s jargon. Certainly, reading project documents facilitated this process. I learned that an RE was a resident engineer, that PM stood for project manager, that a turning point (or TP, or a time-out gesture with the hands) was a surveying term indicating a point temporarily marked to establish the position of a level instrument at a new position, that RHS stood for right-hand side and a ROW problem for a right-of-way problem; a problem that occurred repeatedly, as the site was not fully cleared before the construction works commenced. I learned the different road base layers and their specifications (thickness or liter per m²), as well as the important names in the profession. These technicalities and inside knowledge were essential to understand communications on site.

In terms of language, Chinese-run construction sites across Ethiopia are a linguistic Wild West. Chinese managers and Ethiopian workers communicate with each other in Chinese, Amharic, English, and regional languages such as Tigrinya, or, most commonly, in a pidgin of these languages. On all the road projects I followed, Amharic was the lingua franca among Ethiopians, as most of the consultant staff and foremen came from Addis Ababa or Amhara regional state.

As a European, I came to embody the critical second other (the West). My position in the field was neutral at best and threatening at worst. Much to my surprise, however, I was seen as Chinese by many young Ethiopians, despite my white skin and blonde hair. On the road, I was often greeted by children with “China, China!” much as the Chinese were. If I was not seen as China, I was perceived as a collaborator with China. When I was walking to Hotel Meaza in Alamata on January 20, 2012, a young man shouted angrily at me from the other side of the road: “Why are you working? You should go to church and pray!” It was Epiphany (Am. *T'imqet*),¹¹ a religious holiday. Nonetheless, the Chinese continued their building works on that day, which

11. When I offer the Amharic versions of words, I mark these as *Am*.

resulted in conflict on and off the construction site. On this occasion, I could feel the anger that many locals carried against the Chinese. For the Chinese and Ethiopian engineers, I was, for better or worse, a Westerner.

Despite my focus on the Chinese perspective, I tried to grasp different points of view on the social life of work on the building site, including those of the three parties of the engineering triangle: the employer, the contractor (and subcontractors), and the consultant. This proved challenging, as the three parties had conflicting interests and held various secrets that I, as a researcher, was potentially prying into or passing on to other parties. The fact that the project was running at a loss and was plagued by failures, some of which I personally witnessed, did not make the situation any easier.

Notably, the concerns of both the Chinese and Ethiopians that I was perhaps getting to know too much did not reflect their views of international politics. At the start of my field research I was cautious of how to position myself vis-à-vis interlocutors. Predominantly negative media coverage in Europe of China's role in Africa led me to assume that Chinese workers would be suspicious of me as a Western researcher. In general, though, they were not, although the situation has changed recently.¹²

Only once was I reminded of international politics, when Chen Delin, a mechanic and manager of an asphalt crew, asked me out of the blue, "Do you really think that Hilary Clinton is right in saying that we are colonizing Africa?" Chen and I were hiding from the sun in a box culvert; above us was the deafening rumbling of asphalt rollers, next to us were giggling local children following our conversation. "The Chinese government surely has her motives; to gain votes in the UN, for instance. People and states are in essence the same. They need friends to win against their enemies. But honestly, do you really think we are colonizing Africa?" Chen had just explained that his company, a private construction firm based in Shandong province, had lost at least ETB 10 million to theft in Ethiopia, mainly of petrol, tires, steel, and spare parts. From his perspective, it was the Chinese who were being exploited, rather than the other way around.

12. Westerners, especially those involved in Africa, are usually assumed to bear anti-Chinese sentiments. For a fascinating discussion of (Western) perceptions of Chinese engagement with Africa and the ways in which Chinese actors respond to these perceptions by performing "China in Africa" for the West, see Cheryl Schmitz' work (2014, 2018).

Conclusion

Every day Hamid Mengesha stood in front of his house, motionless, with his hands folded behind his back, overlooking the building site. He lived along the Addis Ababa Ring Road under construction. His house, hidden behind tall juniper trees, adjoined the Debre Markos junction. Despite his ailing heart, which kept him from walking about, Hamid followed all the activities on the building site. Everybody knew him, and he knew everybody, he told me proudly: "Li, the grader operator; Alberto, the Italian consultant engineer; Sisay and Berhe, the inspectors." He was an admirer of project manager Ding, who was always bustling about on site. "The poor man does not even have time to change his clothes," Hamid remarked, smiling. Ding wore a black Adidas sports jacket with gold stripes on the sleeves and worn-out trousers. He drove a Futian, a Chinese pickup, which was devoid of all parts other than those needed to keep the vehicle on the road. When Ding walked by, Hamid gave him a nod.

When he was in his thirties Hamid had fought for the Tigray People's Liberation Front against the Derg regime. He came from Dedebit, where the Tigray People's Liberation Front established its first military base. "It was a dark age," he recounted. According to him, road construction in Ethiopia had only commenced with the establishment of the current government led by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front. The man knew a remarkable amount about road building. I asked whether he had been an engineer. "At my age you know a little bit of everything," was his modest answer. In fact, during the Tigray People's Liberation Front's long march south, which ended with the seizure of the capital city in 1991, Hamid had supervised road construction, which involved creating passages and corridors for the militia. As the main thoroughfares were occupied by the Derg, the Tigray People's Liberation Front had to clear its way through the inhospitable highlands of northern Ethiopia, using confiscated dozers, excavators, and dump trucks.

Talking about the past, Hamid brightened up. Once he was interrupted by a local worker, gasping from running up the slope and pointing at his

water bottle. Hamid allowed the young man to fetch water from the tap at his house. "These boys are poor," he said, "like the Italian engineer, who has come to Africa to work." "And what about the Chinese?" I asked. "The whole world is in crisis. Europe, America, even Africa, except for China. The Chinese are not poor. They are 1.4 billion and all have something to eat." If anything, Hamid was grateful to the Chinese and spoke enthusiastically about the infrastructural development in his district of Addis Ababa. Nonetheless, he fostered hope that the Chinese company working on the city's thoroughfares would soon be replaced by an Ethiopian enterprise. He introduced me to his 18-year-old son, who was in his last year of high school and dreamed of becoming an engineer. "Do you think the Chinese exert any political influence on this country?" I asked one afternoon. "I do not think so. They are just building roads. Look at the Chinese busy here. Look at Mr. Ding. Do you really think he has time to get involved in politics?"

One of the main objectives of this book has been to provide an insight into the lives of the ordinary Chinese, such as project manager Ding, who make sense of, give shape to, and occasionally hijack Chinese involvement in Ethiopia. The mundane actions of workers like Ding or Li and their interactions with Ethiopians on the construction site cast a different light on Chinese activities in Ethiopia to reveal the discrepancy between the dominant narratives and quotidian practices—the hopes that the Chinese workers harbored and the bitterness they tasted.

Certainly, Hamid is right in saying that the Chinese, hard pressed as they were with their daily concerns, had little interest in politics. They had moved to Ethiopia to work and build a better future in China. And yet their activities matter. Their daily engagements prove to be more political than they appear. To be sure, Ding and his colleagues represented, and, more importantly, enacted, China's growing influence in the world. The bitterness they tasted and spoke of reveals the disputed nature of their country's increased engagement in Ethiopia. Rather than being imposed, Chinese-led development is actively negotiated by Ethiopians and Chinese alike. For one thing, the Chinese workers saw themselves challenged by members of the local community, not least their own workers.

Chinese actors, be they government agents or individual entrepreneurs, are commonly assumed to set the standards of their engagement with Africans, yet the vigor and success with which Ethiopian actors—from federal road authorities to rank-and-file workers and from legal authorities to local residents—challenged Chinese authority refute, or at least undermine, this assumption. The bitter response of Chinese workers to Ethiopian resistance and protest, rather, indicates the lack of agency *they* experienced in their engagement with the Ethiopians.

However, the sentiments of Chinese workers in Ethiopia cannot be explained solely by their felt lack of ownership and respect. The bitterness they tasted is also linked to their position as children of peasants, struggling to cast off their rural background; migrants, who temporarily step down to climb up the social ladder in their home country; status-insecure subjects yearning for security in the face of rapid social and economic change at home; men who sought to gain respectability as filial sons, husbands, and fathers; workers who found themselves at the bottom of a corporate hierarchy, deprived of agency; successors of Mao's engineers who no longer enjoyed a respectable reputation at home; Chinese citizens, who were acutely aware of their country's shifting status in the world as superior to Africa.

Interpretations of development and how to give it shape depend on the agents who translate development practices from one context to another. The Chinese arrive in Ethiopia, as they do elsewhere in Africa, with baggage. Their perspectives on development are shaped by official rhetoric, popular narratives, and personal experience, among other factors. To be sure, development is embedded, as are the agents of development, like project management Ding. Their notions of development, such as the commitment to self-improvement, the trust in collective strength, and the faith in upward mobility and asceticism as the principal way to achieve it, informed the Chinese approaches to labor.

The Chinese managers attempted to fashion the Ethiopian laborers into worker subjects who were diligent, humble, and willing to submit to managerial discipline in the name of the advancement of the self and society as a whole. The transformation of Ethiopian workers and the improvement of Ethiopian society were seen to rest on notions of development that entailed a dual project of achieving material and spiritual civilization. The transformation of the built environment and that of the mind were part of the same trajectory, and it was expected to generate a more powerful and prosperous society. To management's consternation, the Ethiopian workers were not nearly as subservient as the Chinese peasant workers who had arrived fresh from the countryside to take up work on the shop floors and the construction sites in the rapidly industrializing and urbanizing cities of late twentieth-century China. For one thing, Chinese managers, who had once occupied the lowest rungs of the corporate hierarchy themselves, lacked authority and credibility, not least because of their arbitrary, and at times fatalistic, management style. The strong belief in productivity and its rewards that they sought to instill in their workers found little traction.

Chinese managers complained about lazy, unproductive, and inefficient Ethiopian workers. These lamentations, repeated ad nauseam, in fact served a crucial function. While seeking to speed up the building work and thereby keep costs to a minimum, incapable and indolent Ethiopian workers, or at

least in the Chinese portrayal of them, proved to be central in protecting the safe distance between “us” (Chinese) and “them” (Ethiopians), a distance that was meant to safeguard tenuous Chinese authority and justify racial disparities not only in the corporate hierarchy but also more generally on the global stage. Indeed, the construction site was a microcosm that represented broader geopolitical dynamics. From the start, remaking Ethiopians into disciplined workers was a Janus-faced project that could never be fully achieved if the color glass ceiling was to be preserved. The Ethiopian worker had to remain at least a little bit indolent, a little bit backward, and a little bit immature in order to protect Chinese expertise, managerial control, and the much higher wages that expatriates earned in comparison with the local workforce. The enforcement of labor discipline, then, not only targeted but also to a certain degree constructed the supposedly poor work ethic of Ethiopian workers.

Not only did Chinese managers expect the other to commit to self-development, they also trusted their subordinate compatriots to commit to the same ideal. In Ethiopia notions such as *suzhi* and *wenhua* that were taken as measures of spiritual civilization were deployed in value judgments about Chinese colleagues, who corrected or commented on each other’s behavior. The idea that development takes place or ought to take place simultaneously was a key idea transported from China and used in interactions with Ethiopian workers and Chinese colleagues alike. Protecting the reputation of the knowledgeable, diligent, and restrained Chinese was crucial to retain their credibility as harbingers of development. To the chagrin of high-level managers, some members of the Chinese community, in particular, the low-level managers of private subcontractors, grew increasingly intimate with members of the local community. They threatened to spoil the reputation of the Chinese by closing the social and physical distance from the Ethiopians, the very distance that project managers were intent on preserving. Nighttime encounters between Chinese men and Ethiopian women were feared to jeopardize managerial authority, and not only that. Sexual intimacy was believed to lead to a loss of integrity, as the quality of having moral principles and as the state of being undivided, more generally.

Labor discipline, implemented by Chinese managers, was met by calculated indiscipline on the part of Ethiopian laborers. In practice, the disciplining of the local workforce had reverse effects. The tug-of-war that ensued between the expatriate management and Ethiopian workers on the building site was extended into the courtroom. The pushback from Ethiopian workers meant that Chinese management was forced to adjust contractual procedures, working hours, wage payment regulations, hiring and dismissal practices, and the punishments they meted out on-site. The remarkable leverage that Ethiopian workers had can be explained by their ad hoc alliances not

only with legal authorities, such as the judges of *wereda* courts and other legal brokers, who made the local workers aware of their rights and the expatriate managers of their obligations, but also civic authorities, who effectively legalized what might be classified as illegal practices, such as labor strikes and pilfering, through deliberate inaction.

It caught Chinese managers by surprise that rather than safeguarding the interests of the employers, the authorities chose to side with the rank-and-file workers. In China, county and municipal authorities often support corporate management with an eye to boosting the local economy, sometimes with fatal costs to workers' welfare and the environment. From the vantage point of the Chinese, the authorities in Tigray lacked such incentives for reasons they found difficult to understand. Where development required self-sacrifice and submission to management on the part of the workers, as they saw it, it also demanded commitment from the authorities in supporting enterprises to stimulate the economy. They expected both workers and the authorities to act in the name of productivity and thereby focus on the greater good of development. The supposed unwillingness of the Ethiopians to submit to this ideal was taken to testify to their lack of willingness to develop as a result.

Bitterness was nonetheless offset by hope. Chinese workers brought with them a great dose of optimism to counterpoise a long tradition of Afro-pessimism. Having witnessed Chinese society metamorphose in a wink, their confidence in the ability to transform Africa and the lives of Africans is hardly surprising. Their confidence, then, is widely acknowledged, and rightly so. The Chinese have come to possess the capacity and the know-how to bring change—yet not necessarily on their own terms, as is all too often and easily assumed.

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