



**Victims and Victimizers: A
Microhistory of Chinese Settlers in
Africa**

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Critical Asian Humanities**

April 2020

This project was submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Graduate Liberal Studies Program in the Graduate School of Duke University.

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Abstract

When it comes to the current Sino-African relationship, the question often asked is if China is a neo-colonial force in Africa or not. This question elides the complexity of collaboration, negotiation and exploitation. What I try to achieve in this essay is to shift the scale from a macro (nation to continent) model to that of a micro level by analyzing how Chinese laborers (in both state and private sectors) and the narratives they construct, offer a much more complex interactions between microhistory and China's inroad into Africa.

In the first chapter, I borrow Miriam Driessen's description, *tasting bitterness*, or in my words, enduring hardships, to demonstrate the struggles Chinese workers face in the construction sector where criticism of China's land-grabbing and resource-gathering in Ethiopia is most visible.¹ Through interviews with managers and workers of RCE,² a Chinese State-Owned Enterprise (SOE), I observe that the Chinese companies' exploitive labor practices in Ethiopia often brought lawsuits to the companies and made the Chinese laborers endure hardships in Africa.

Building on Chapter One's theme of enduring hardships, in Chapter Two, I then analyze four individual actors in agriculture who are independent of the Chinese state's project in Africa. The goal is to examine if they share experiences during their stay in Africa that are similar to Chapter One's migrant workers in the state sector. I first examine the migration intentions of individual migrants using Edwin Kangyang Lin's *small pond migration theory*. I then turn to Driessen's *tasting bitterness* again to complement Lin's analysis of migration intentions and use her concept to shed light on the migrants' commitment to enduring hardships. Based on the microhistory of Chinese diaspora in Africa, I argue that the current Chinese migration to Africa is an unintended consequence of the rise of China in the world

¹ Cook, Seth, et al. "Chinese Migrants in Africa: Facts and Fictions from the Agri-Food Sector in Ethiopia and Ghana." *World Development*, vol. 81, 2016, pp. 61–70.

² The interviewer, Miriam Driessen, hides the full name of RCE from the readers for privacy reasons.

system and that these settlers are both victimizers and victims of this fast-changing circumstance. My project complicates and disrupts the oft-cited West vs. China dichotomy that obfuscates the everyday struggles and survivals of the Chinese diaspora in Africa.

Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Introduction	- 1 -
Chapter One: Victims and Victimizers	- 5 -
<i>Context and History</i>	- 6 -
<i>Tasting Bitterness</i>	- 13 -
<i>Change of Discourse from Socialist Regime to Economic Reform</i>	- 14 -
<i>Suzhi and Tasting Bitterness</i>	- 19 -
<i>Arrival in Ethiopia</i>	- 21 -
<i>The Failure of the Chinese Model in Ethiopia</i>	- 25 -
<i>Entangled in Lawsuits</i>	- 29 -
Chapter Two: Chinese Migrants in African Agriculture	- 33 -
<i>Context and History</i>	- 33 -
<i>Methods</i>	- 35 -
<i>Case Study: Tao, an Inexperienced Chinese Farmer in Ethiopia</i>	- 38 -
<i>Case summary 1</i>	- 41 -
<i>Liu Changming: A Successful Story in Zambia</i>	- 42 -
<i>Case Summary 2</i>	- 48 -
<i>Hou Xuecheng: A Successful Story in Namibia</i>	- 49 -
<i>Case Summary 3</i>	- 54 -
<i>Hao Shengli: A Middle-Class Immigrant in Mozambique</i>	- 55 -
<i>Case Summary 4</i>	- 62 -
Conclusion.....	- 65 -
Bibliography	- 67 -

Introduction

China's emergence as a capitalist power in the 21st century marked both a development miracle and a capitalist dilemma. As China's economy expanded, so did its demand for natural resources and its need to export its industrial production to developing countries. For this reason, the existing literature on the Sino-African relationship often categorizes China as a neo-imperialist and neo-colonial power that prioritizes natural resources and economic interests at the cost of human rights.³ While these critiques are noteworthy as they underscore the existing problems in environment and human rights issues accompanying China's rise—and it is urgent for China to solve the problems caused by its rapid economic development in the past 40 years—critics tend to deliberately oversimplify the nature of China's rise as economics and resource-driven and exaggerate the Chinese presence in Africa as a neo-colonial and neo-imperial on the account of China's increasing activities in the construction sector and overall influence in the continent.

For current studies of Sino-African relationship, the risk of examining China as a neo-colonial and neo-imperial force in Africa is that it obscures the larger structural problem within capitalism that places Africans and many others in a disadvantageous position of the global supply chain. Furthermore, when the critics denounce the Chinese presence in Africa as neo-colonial and neo-imperial, they overlook the post-colonial influence of the global north in the continent where the north still holds the dominant market share in most African countries to this day. In this light, the narrative of Chinese being neo-imperial and neo-colonial in Africa distracts our attention from what would otherwise be a good argument about China's participation in an already exploitative world system, which disadvantages Africa.

To objectively examine the implications of China's presence in Africa, in this essay, I focus on the microhistory of the Chinese diaspora in Africa. The two main frameworks I apply in this essay are

³ Cook, Seth, et al. "Chinese Migrants in Africa: Facts and Fictions from the Agri-Food Sector in Ethiopia and Ghana." *World Development*, vol. 81, 2016, pp. 61–70.

Miriam Driessen's *tasting bitterness* and Edwin Kangyang Lin's *small pond migration theory*, which take into account the Chinese laborers in both state and private sectors to provide a different narrative than the mainstream media.

In Chapter One, I focus on the Chinese workers' presence in Ethiopia and provide a brief historical review of the Sino-African relationship from 1949 to the 2000s to demonstrate that today's Sino-African relationship is no longer about ideology and Third World solidarity as it was in the past. To understand today's Chinese presence in Africa and to critically examine Western media's criticism that Chinese individual migrants under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) are land-grabbing and empire-building, I first apply Miriam Driessen's description, *tasting bitterness*, to the Chinese workers' experiences in Ethiopia. In short, Driessen's *tasting bitterness* describes the hardships that the Chinese laborers encountered as bitterness and the Chinese laborers endure hardships as the process of tasting bitterness. Furthermore, Driessen argues, based on her fieldwork in Ethiopia from 2011 to 2012, that *tasting bitterness* is a shared experience for all Chinese laborers in Africa.

I push Driessen's concept further by adding that *tasting bitterness* is a dominant ideology adopted by the Chinese state to justify its exploitation of workers and to obscure the larger structural problems within its economic system and working model. Additionally, *tasting bitterness* is also a narrative that tells the lower-class laborers to work hard in face of difficulties so they can achieve better lives. But this narrative is ideological in the sense that it solely attributes success to one's hard work and overlooks the existence and the importance of external circumstances that, to a large extent, affect the outcome of one's success/failure. For example, when a migrant worker tries to save money to pay off his housing mortgage, his goal of saving up enough money for his housing mortgage is not only dependent on his hard work but also on whether his employer will dock his salaries and if there is enough funding for the construction project.

In "Arriving in Ethiopia," I argue that the narrative of *tasting bitterness* is important in examining the Chinese laborers in Africa to understand the mindset of the laborers so we can get a better sense of

who those people are, what they try to achieve in Africa, and why they remain in Africa despite the difficulties and hardships. A better understanding of the historical contexts of the Chinese laborers in Africa, I argue, helps us examine the Chinese presence in Africa since the majority of overseas Chinese in Africa are lower-class migrants.

As a dominant ideology, *tasting bitterness* reflects, if not demonstrates, the larger structural problems within the Chinese working model. That is, when it tells the workers to work hard so they will be rewarded, it deliberately obscures the contradiction between the company's profit maximization and the protection of the workers' rights. Instead, the ideology ascribes one's success to his or her hard work or one's ability to endure hardships. In this light, when I examine the cause for the Chinese companies' hardships in Ethiopia in "The Failure of Chinese Model in Ethiopia," and "Entangled in Lawsuits," I note that it was when the Chinese capitalist entrepreneurs applied the Chinese working model, which uses *tasting bitterness* and *suzhi*⁴ to justify their exploitation of workers within the Chinese community, to the African workers that triggered the lawsuits against their abusive labor practices on the African workers as well as the local community's animosity.

Building on Chapter One, I further examine the Chinese diaspora community in Africa by focusing on individual stories to compare with the experience of the laborers in the state sector. Due to the lack of ethnography on my part, I heavily rely on interviews by Howard French, Miriam Driessen, as well as the non-profit documentaries about Sino-African relationship by Marc Francis and Nick Francis, Al Jazeera, and Bram van Paesschen.

In addition to *tasting bitterness*, I borrow Lin's *small pond migration theory* to provide a concept for us to understand the pull force that attracted Chinese to Africa. Through the lens of *small pond migration theory*, I argue that the Chinese individual migrants' interest in agriculture is motivated as much by the industry's low entering threshold as by the non-economic benefits like the freedom to be

⁴ *Suzhi* is a quality overdetermined by one's educational level, cultural background, age, and social status. I will elaborate on it in section "*Tasting Bitterness and Suzhi*."

one's own boss. What is often ignored in the criticism that characterizes Chinese as land-grabbing and empire-building is that it overlooks the complexity of the Chinese diaspora in Africa, and instead, it sees that presence in Africa as a monolithic one.

Delving more into the microhistory of the Chinese individual migrants in Africa, I argue that the Chinese farmers' rudimentary farming methods limited the scale of their farmlands and made their farming business able to cater only to the local niche. Indeed, as observed from the individuals' cases, I note that the individual migrants' farming methods were independent of the Chinese state's geo-political and geo-economic strategies of helping Africans overcome the food shortage problem by using China's advanced agricultural technology to promote large-scale farming.

When I compare the individual migrants in Chapter Two to the lower-class laborers in Chapter One, I note that individual migrants also believe that success is directly related to one's hard work, despite all the other external circumstances that may contribute more to the results. Based on that, I further examine the role of *tasting bitterness* in the individual migrants' stay in Africa, especially when they encountered and endured hardships from the local government and the heavy workload of their farming business. Furthermore, I examine why they continued working hard and staying committed to *tasting bitterness* even after they succeeded in their own terms. At that point, Driessen's *small pond migration theory* falls short of explanation, but *tasting bitterness* provides us with a possible answer in the context of a torrent of newcomers from China into the African agricultural market: if one believes in the narrative that success is related only to hard work, it is likely he or she will also agree with the argument that if one continues working hard, he or she will stay competitive and to be free from elimination from the market.

Chapter One: Victims and Victimizers

One of the goals of this chapter is to contextualize the Sino-African relationship's development and to delineate the shift of that relationship from Third World solidarity to the bilateral economic development. Today's Sino-African relationship, I argue, is built upon a mutual need for development and cooperation that (1) allows Africa to reduce its reliance on the global North and to diversify its source of funding and investment and (2) allows China to hedge against the maritime threat from the U.S. using infrastructure construction to support land power expansion on a world scale. In addition, I want to point out that today's Sino-African relationship is diversified and complicated by private companies and individual migrant workers who are under the umbrella of large SOEs and are invisible to the popular media.

Another goal here is to use *tasting bitterness* as both a narrative and an ideology to examine the lower-class Chinese laborers in the Tigray region of Ethiopia from 2008 to 2013. Through the lens of *tasting bitterness*, I peer into the workers who comprised the majority of the overseas Chinese in Africa to focus on why they endured hardships, how they endured hardships, and what their hardships were about. I also take into account the Chinese companies that employed the workers. Specifically, I focus on RCE and its subcontractors who were building a road for the local community, which starts from Alamata and ends in Hewane (around 160km).⁵ From this case study in Tigray, I argue that Chinese companies encountered hardships because of their profit-oriented working culture, their exploitive labor practices, their unfamiliarity with local labor laws, and their poor relationship with the local government. The Chinese laborers, on the other hand, encountered hardships beyond their control.⁶

⁵ Driessen, Miriam. *Tales of Hope, Tastes of Bitterness: Chinese Road Builders in Ethiopia* (HKU Press, 2019). P18

⁶ Such as the extreme local weather, the dullness of their work, the loneliness of life, and the more serious exploitation of their rights as workers from their employers.

Context and History

The development of the Sino-African relationship can be divided into three main eras in which large infrastructure construction was carried out by Chinese in Africa: the Mao era (1949-1976), the Deng era (1981-1989), and the post-Tiananmen repression era (after 1989). During the Mao era, the CCP's relationship with African countries was driven by its political interest as the fledgling People's Republic of China (PRC) needed those countries' supports to replace the Republic of China (Taiwan)'s position in the UN.⁷ Though economic exchanges took place in addition to China's pursuit of its political interests, they were less noticeable. One thing worth noting during that era is that the Sino-African relationship was by no means all positive: there were countries like Angola who allied with the USSR and turned against China during Sino-Soviet conflict in the 1960s. It was in this large context that the construction of TAZARA took place in 1970.

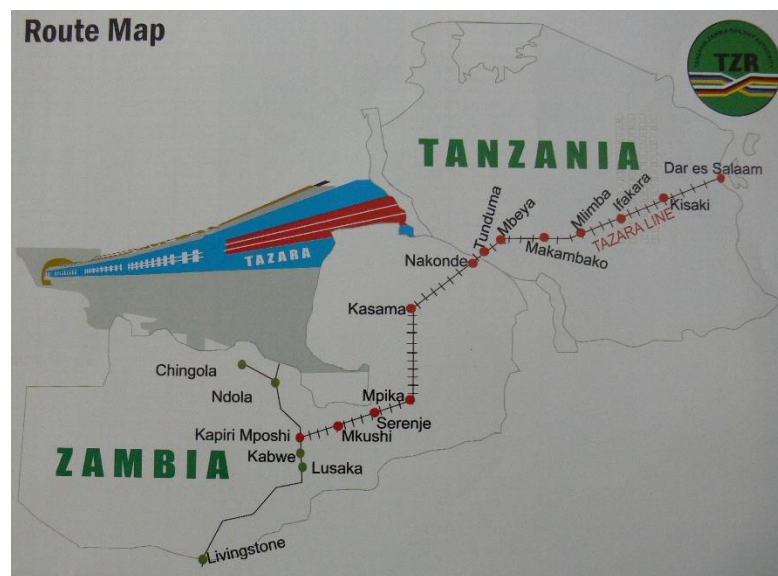


Fig. 1. *Tanzanian-Zambian Railway Authority (TAZARA Route)*⁸

⁷ Bhattacharya, Abanti. "Chinese Nationalism Under Xi Jinping Revisited." *India Quarterly: A Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 75, no. 2, 2019, pp. 245–252., doi:10.1177/0974928419841789.

⁸ "RailwayPro." *RailwayPro*, 17 May 2016, <https://www.railwaypro.com/wp/plans-unveiled-to-revamp-tazara-railway-line/>.

In Jamie Monson's words, "the TAZARA, or Freedom Railway, was the centerpiece of China's development efforts in Africa in the 1960s and 1970s."⁹ As Monson explains, the idea of building a 1860km railway that would connect Zambia to the Indian Ocean had a long history, but it was Southern Rhodesia's Unilateral Declaration of Independence in 1965, the West's reluctance to fund a railway that seemed uneconomic, as well as the growing conflict between the white-dominated states of Southern Africa and the independent states to their north, that made the building of the railway a pressing political need.¹⁰ It was under such circumstance, China's offer for the construction of railroad provided an alternative source of capital to the longstanding Bretton Woods system, which discriminates against Third-World countries by offering loans with political and economic conditionalities. Over the following decades, countries like Sudan and Angola turned to China for funding when the West withheld credit due to their poor economic conditions and unstable political environments. China, in this narrative, weakened the hegemony of the West in Third-World countries and reconfigured the existing monetary order.

Delving more into China's ideology-oriented project in Africa, recent studies on the rhetoric of solidarity during the construction of TAZARA demonstrate that while Chinese officials tried to build and enhance solidarity through slogans such as "the poor helping the poor" and "Third World Solidarity without border,"¹¹ the Chinese workers in TAZARA project faced cultural and linguistic barriers when interacting with their African counterparts.¹² But that is not to say that there was no solidarity at all during the construction of TAZARA. Stronger social bonds were created between Chinese workers and their African counterparts in worksites such as the first section of the rail line, from Dar es Salaam to Mlimba (502km), where they spent long time working and overcoming natural and technical difficulties together.¹³

⁹ Monson, Jamie. *Africa's Freedom Railway: How a Chinese Development Project Changed Lives and Livelihoods in Tanzania* (Indiana University Press, 2011). P2

¹⁰ Ibid. P21

¹¹ Ibid. P3

¹² Ibid. P59

¹³ 不羈智士 . Bilibili, 10 Nov. 2017, www.bilibili.com/video/av16178129/.

A case in point here is that on April 12, 1968, the first Chinese engineering team arrived in Tanzania during the monsoon season and faced an immediate challenge to complete their project on time: the continual rainstorm turned their construction line into a wide marsh, which prevented the use of machines as they were not waterproof.¹⁴ In such rigid local circumstances, the Chinese workers and their Tanzanian and Zambian counterparts had to stand in the muddy water deep up to the waist and even to the chest to drain the marsh using shovels and bare hands so their project would be finished in time. It was a miracle indeed when the project was finished ahead of the schedule, with the cooperation between Chinese technicians their African counterparts. The cooperation was visualized by the CCP through propaganda and the Chinese comedians on the New Year Gala.¹⁵ What this cooperation demonstrates is that the cultural and linguistic problems between Chinese and Africans were not all unreconcilable, at least during the socialist era.

In hindsight, the completion of TAZARA was mostly credited to Chinese workers, rather than their African counterparts, as the proof for China's socialist bonding with its African friends, and Chinese workers' ability to taste bitterness, or endure hardship.¹⁶ However, Monson notes that "the experience of railway construction and living along TAZARA was a transformative one" for the individuals on both sides.¹⁷ Indeed, both Chinese and Africans who participated in the construction of TAZARA found things they needed from the project. Africans obtained professional training and skills required for their nation-building and gained regional development along the railway. Chinese technicians received the higher payment promised by the Chinese government, and the opportunity to travel outside China allowed them

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Chinese New Year Gala (*chunwan*) is a Chinese New Year special produced by Chinese Central Television (CCTV).

¹⁶ 百度一下, 你就知道, www.baidu.com/link?url=FTbE8m-GrRDS3NgLYroIEAo5063rL0pC4ZEUGOA7iy14pr161VfuYQ9HMZMSXDt5WQquV56lcXMwjCmz1q0OZ_&wd=&eqid=c3da5cde001d6940000000065e73cad0.

¹⁷ Monson, Jamie. *Africa's Freedom Railway: How a Chinese Development Project Changed Lives and Livelihoods in Tanzania* (Indiana University Press, 2011). P7

to achieve a better material life back home and broadened their worldview at a time when mobility in China was limited.¹⁸

Despite the importance of individual experience in the construction of TAZARA as it shows the reality beneath the socialist discourse, it was often overshadowed by the state's political and diplomatic interests in the existing literature of the Sino-African relationship back then. This situation changed when President Deng's Economic Reform was introduced in 1978 which provides us with a lens to examine the individual migrants' interests in migrating to Africa. Based on that, as I demonstrate in Chapter Two, today's Sino-African relationship depends, to a great extent, on the individual migrants who conduct the most interactions with Africans outside the workplace.

When Deng secured his leadership in the CCP in 1978, Mao's ideological and political approach to Africa was eclipsed by Deng's economic growth and peaceful foreign diplomacy.¹⁹ As a result, China's economic relation with the West improved and its aid to Africa declined, as did diplomatic ties. While we still see some continuities between the socialist and the reform eras through the government's rhetoric of South-South cooperation and Third World solidarity, the reality of decreasing financial aid and diplomatic visits showed a hollowing Sino-African relationship during the time.

The turning point of the Sino-African relationship came after the pro-democracy movement of 1989, which was bloodily shut down by the CCP at Tiananmen Square. The international community's responses to the CCP's shutdown varied. Whereas the democratic West criticized and isolated the CCP, African countries who were in favor of authoritarianism supported the CCP's repression of the movement. The differences in their standpoints on Tiananmen Square protest led the Chinese government to re-evaluate its foreign policies and reinvigorated its political interest in Africa. China's interests and presence in Africa increased at the end of Cold War in 1999, when the West's declining interest in Africa allowed China to begin developing a Sino-African relationship beyond the past political realm. From that

¹⁸ Ibid. P150

¹⁹ Bhattacharya, Abanti. "Chinese Nationalism Under Xi Jinping Revisited." *India Quarterly: A Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 75, no. 2, 2019, pp. 245–252., doi:10.1177/0974928419841789.

point on, as observed from the economic data in the Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC), the new Sino-African relationship drifted away from their geopolitical connections and entered a new stage where the focus is on geo-economics.²⁰

For Africa's source of funding and modernization of its infrastructure, China provided a less conditional alternative to the West. For China's surplus industrial capacity, which grew over 2,300 million metric tons since the 2000s, Africa met the demand of China's growing market and became a perfect place for China to externalize its problems through infrastructure construction. The new Sino-African relationship seemed to be a perfect marriage, at least at the state level.²¹ That said, the economic exchanges did not experience an immediate boom until the 2000s. In 2000, when Sino-African economic exchanges reached \$10 billion, ten times the amount from 1980, and continued experiencing a steep climb in the following decades, China's presence in Africa went deeper than the economic bond on the surface.²² It was then this new Sino-African relationship started to attract the world's attention. As Hillary Clinton remarked in a television interview in 2011: "Africa must beware of "new colonialism" as China expands ties there and focus instead on partners able to help build productive capacity on the continent... The United States is investing in the people of Zambia, not just the elites, and we are investing for the long run."²³

In her interview, Clinton made explicit that she saw China's increasing presence in Africa as neo-colonial and insinuated that China's aid to Africa was designed to earn quick money, and its goals in Africa were to collect resources in the short term. Her charge against China's presence in Africa could be supported by the fact that Chinese SOEs and their subcontractors did conduct capitalist practices in mining and petroleum industry. That is, however, not to say that China, a capitalist economic entity, is

²⁰ "The Observatory of Economic Complexity." *OEC*, oec.world/en/.

²¹ Brun, Lukas. "Overcapacity in Steel: China's Role in a Global Problem." *Center on Globalization, Governance & Competitiveness, Duke University & Alliance for American Manufacturing* (2016).

²² Wonacott, Peter. "In Africa, U.S. Watches China's Rise." *The Wall Street Journal*, 2 Sept. 2011, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424053111903392904576510271838147248>.

²³ Quinn, Andrew, and M. Heinrich. "Clinton warns against 'new colonialism' in Africa." *Reuters*. Accessed April 10 (2011): 2015.

also a neo-colonial force. For one thing, the definitions of neo-colonialism are controversial, but two characteristics are certain: (1) capital accumulation through violent dispossession and exploitation of the lower classes; (2) rise and expansion of hegemony through violent state actions.²⁴ These two characteristics do not characterize China's rise and its presence in Africa at the current stage. For another, when we put China's activities within the context of the U.S. military hegemony in Somalia and Niger and the global north's post-colonial influence in the continent, China's presence in Africa is still in an early stage, so is not able to compete with Western countries. In this light, to say the Chinese presence in Africa is neo-colonial distracts attention from what would otherwise be a good argument about China's increasing presence in Africa as one element of capital accumulation on a world scale within the context of global capitalism.

A closer reading of China's domestic issues, accompanied by China's economic development, suggests that one way to examine China's presence in Africa is that it is not as much about economic development and accumulation of natural resources as it is about solving its industrial overcapacity caused by its saturated infrastructure construction at home and surplus labor supply. Another way is to put China's presence within the context of the U.S. hegemony and its military and economic pressure on China in East Asia. For this approach, Gao Bai's lecture about Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) provides a good overview.²⁵ In short, from his perspective, the U.S. uses two main tools to establish its hegemony: dollars (monetary policies) and US-led multinational institutions such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the World Bank.²⁶ Infrastructure construction, thus, allows China to hedge against this hegemony by providing a window for China to offer low-interest loans and technical help to weaken the U.S. regional hegemony. What is more, through financing infrastructure projects, China

²⁴ Bello, Walden. *China: An Imperial Power in the Image of the West?* Focus on the Global South, 2019, <https://focusweb.org/publications/china-an-imperial-power-in-the-image-of-the-west/>.

²⁵ BRI is a transnational project proposed by Xi Jinping in 2013 that covers 71 countries in Eurasia continent, the Middle East, and Americas. With an estimated cost of US \$575 billion, it targets to build connectivity and cooperation in economic development within its range (The World Bank 2018).

²⁶ Cornell East Asia Program. *Vimeo*, 5 Mar. 2020, vimeo.com/159550879.

establishes its leadership role among these developing countries when the West shifts from its focus on infrastructure construction during the colonial time to today's humanitarian aid.



Fig. 2. *China's Bridge and Road Initiative (BRI)*²⁷

The graph above shows two main routes of the BRI, the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, which are supported by infrastructure construction. What this graph shows is that, through BRI, China is using the expansion of land power to the Eurasian continent, Middle East, and Africa to hedge against the maritime threat from the Obama administration's Pivot to Asia plan.²⁸ The driving force of land power expansion is infrastructure construction, which was monopolized by the state in the past. Today, the infrastructure construction is mostly carried out by private companies, the subcontractors of large SOEs, and their interactions with African locals and their experience with infrastructure construction in Africa created a narrative that is fundamental for the current and future research on the Sino-African relationship: a story of enduring hardships.

²⁷ Kelly, Patrick. "JapanForward." *JapanForward*, 26 Apr. 2018, <https://japan-forward.com/can-china-keep-up-as-southeast-asia-diversifies-ties/> さしかえ中国一帯一路 0419/.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

Tasting Bitterness

Miriam Driessen, in *Tales of Hope, Tastes of Bitterness*, uses her fieldwork in Ethiopia from 2011 to 2012 to challenge the stereotypes which portray the Chinese in Africa as criminals, with Africans as victims and Westerners as do-gooders.²⁹ More specifically, Driessen uses *tasting bitterness*, a Chinese term that can be translated as enduring hardships for success, to describe the reality Chinese construction companies and their workers had to deal with every day in Tigray.³⁰ As she notes, while the word “bitterness” carries a sense of struggle and unwillingness, it is offset by a hope of having a better life, which makes people more capable of tasting bitterness.

However, for the sake of non-native Chinese readers, using the Chinese term *tasting bitterness* (*chi ku*) to describe the hardships that the Chinese encountered and endured in Africa is not as clear as saying “enduring hardships.” For this reason, in this essay, when I describe the hardships that the Chinese encountered and endured, I will refer to enduring hardships rather than *tasting bitterness*. But when I use *tasting bitterness* as a narrative and an ideology, I will keep it italicized, so the readers will not confuse it with “enduring hardships.”

Building on Driessen’s short definition of *tasting bitterness*, I argue that *tasting bitterness* is a contestant discourse that constantly changes its meaning and function depending on the context. For example, one can use *tasting bitterness* to describe the reality Chinese companies are facing each day in Africa. One can also define *tasting bitterness* as an ideology of endurance or perseverance that obscures the larger structural problems, such as the uneven distribution of wealth and the corruption of the government. In addition, it can be seen as a narrative the migrants tell of their own success and others’ failures. Given that, in this chapter, I am going to examine these approaches to understanding *tasting bitterness*. The advantage of seeing the Chinese presence in Africa through the lens of *tasting bitterness* is

²⁹ Driessen, Miriam. *Tales of Hope, Tastes of Bitterness: Chinese Road Builders in Ethiopia* (HKU Press, 2019). P4

³⁰ Ibid. P158

that it allows us to more objectively examine China's presence in Africa and re-examine the popular literature which describes Africans as the victims of Chinese presence in Africa. Furthermore, as a narrative, it allows us to understand the migrants' way of thinking and why some of them endure hardships while others give up in the face of similar difficulties.

To start with discussion of *tasting bitterness*, I note that the term is used not only by the Chinese diaspora, but also by the Chinese government during the revolutionary and socialist era (1949-1978) as a discourse of suffering and sacrifice to praise the domestic Chinese workers who overcame physical hardships to obtain benefits for the party.³¹ However, the nature of this discourse soon changed to a different one when the country went through a rapid economic development and other dramatic social changes that came along. That is, the discourse of *tasting bitterness* then became the tone and experience of victims of China's rapid development. Thus, to understand what tasting bitterness means today, it is necessary to begin with China's modern history from the revolutionary era to the economic reform so we could have a basic idea about how the discourse came into its current form.

Change of Discourse from Socialist Regime to Economic Reform

After the communists took power in China in 1949, workers were put under the control of the state. Allocating their work, housing, food and clothing and even their marriages, work units (*danwei*) looked after their workers for life.³² Though workers from rural areas received fewer benefits and protections than SOE workers and city residents, being a worker was still a respected career which contributed to the construction of socialist society. However, the reform era brought an end to the collective worker practices. While the emergence of a labor subcontracting system and the privatization of SOEs increased the efficiency and productivity of the factories, they caused mass layoffs and smashed

³¹ Ibid. P168

³² Lu, Xiaobo, and Elizabeth J. Perry, eds. *Danwei: The changing Chinese workplace in historical and comparative perspective*. Me Sharpe, 1997.

laborers' "iron rice bowl" promised by work units during the Mao era. To be more specific, the labor subcontracting system which outsourced tasks to lower subcontractors put workers in a disadvantageous position where their rights as workers were abused by the employers and their payments were often delayed and unfulfilled as the top tier developers ran into debt.³³

For example, the bidding price for a set of villas in post-reform China which was worth 10 million RMB was 760,000 RMB for the first tier contractor.³⁴ The first tier contractors then outsourced the project to second tier contractors who were responsible for raw materials and labor use. The second-tier contractors further subcontracted the project to third tier who provided labor supply. In turn, third tiers relied on the fourth and fifth tiers who set up labor service company to help recruit workers from rural areas. The profit for a project like that was in the first two tiers hands while the rest of the tiers did not have much bargaining power with the first two tiers and were forced to take on a new project, even if it was a money-losing one, to compensate the previous loss. The logic of this was explained by Lao Fun, a low-tier subcontractor: "When the rich buy a 10-million villa, they use an additional 1 million for renovation. I am waiting to try my luck to get that work."³⁵

Lao Fun's plan, as well as those of many other low-tier subcontractors, of getting into the construction chain so they could keep the business going, provided a temporary fix for their financial problems. However, the downside of this strategy was that it sacrificed workers' rights and generated wage arrears. What exacerbated the workers' situations was that the local governments did not tend to stop or regulate the employers' violations of workers' rights; instead it turned a blind eye to the workers' situation to provide a comfortable environment for both domestic and foreign investors.³⁶ With regard to this phenomenon, Arif Dirlik in his book, *Complicities*, provides a detailed narrative to explain the

³³ Ngai, Pun, and Lu Huilin. "A Culture of Violence: The Labor Subcontracting System And Collective Action By Construction Workers In Post-Socialist China." *The China Journal*, vol. 64, 2010, pp. 143–158., doi:10.1086/tcj.64.20749250.

³⁴ *Ibid.* P149

³⁵ *Ibid.* P150

³⁶ Dirlik, Arif. *Complicities: The Peoples Republic of China in Global Capitalism* (Prickly Paradigm Press, 2017). P154

exploitation of workers that arose with China's rapid economic development by the government and high-tier contractors. He points out the dichotomy of economic development and social transformation embedded in the party before 1978, which eventually caused tragedies, such as the Great Leap Forward (1958-1960), the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), and the Tiananmen tragedy of 1989.³⁷ China's rapid economic development, he argues, can be accounted for by the government's "sprawling organizational structure put in place by the revolution" that guarantees the efficiency of its policies.³⁸ But the beneficiary of this sprawling structure is not the workers during the reform era as it was in the collective working system during the socialist era. From the reform era and onward, the reality of Chinese wealth distribution is reminiscent of David Harvey's concept of *accumulation by dispossession*, as the China's capitalist policies in the reform era resulted in accumulation of wealth in the hands of rich and powerful minorities.³⁹

Building on Harvey and Dirlik, I note that what is ultimately at issue in the Chinese working environment is the subcontracting system, which is a joint product of capitalism that helps reduce the costs of construction projects for profit-making companies. While the companies benefit from the subcontracting system, as they can recruit cheap laborers, the workers' situation worsens as their rights as workers are abused by their employers.⁴⁰ For example, Chinese construction workers only receive 10-20% of the monthly salaries promised by their employers before project completion, and usually they don't receive the rest of the payment in time.⁴¹ However, as observed from Pun Ngai and Lu Huilin, most workers do not take action against their employers unless they haven't received their pay by the end of the

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid. P62

³⁹ Glassman, Jim. "Primitive accumulation, accumulation by dispossession, accumulation by 'extra-economic' means." *Progress in human geography* 30.5 (2006): 608-625.

⁴⁰ Ngai, Pun, and Lu Huilin. "A Culture of Violence: The Labor Subcontracting System And Collective Action By Construction Workers In Post-Socialist China." *The China Journal*, vol. 64, 2010, pp. 143-158., doi:10.1086/tcj.64.20749250.

⁴¹ Ibid.

Lunar New Year.⁴² From a Western perspective, the workers' inaction at the exploitation of their rights may sound strange today, considering the existence of protective labor laws and effective means to protect labor rights, such as strikes and legal complaints. I argue that the Chinese government's reapplication of the revolutionary discourse of *tasting bitterness* to the workers' situation today traps the workers inside an ideological illusion, which renders success and failure based on individual choice to endure hardships instead of on historical and social factors. In other words, the government uses *tasting bitterness* as an ideology to obscure the structural problems within the subcontracting system and create an illusion that if one works hard, he or she will be rewarded.

Delving more into *tasting bitterness* as an ideology, I note that the Chinese government drew a parallel between today's exploitation of workers and the definition of *tasting bitterness* in the revolutionary past, which portrayed hardships and misfortune as bitterness and one's perseverance to overcome adversities as his or her ability to taste bitterness. By relating one's hardships of wage arrears and violation of workers' rights to the hardships that the older generations of Chinese workers had to endure during the socialist era, the Chinese government offered a hope for the workers who suffered exploitation -- a hope that promised the workers that if they taste bitterness today, they will be rewarded in the future. But this hope is ideological in the sense that it is reminiscent of the American Dream, which is constructed by a "frontier" spirit of individualism and overlooks the external circumstances beyond one's control.

In addition, the workers' inaction at their own exploitation can also be understood as their acceptance of that reality. That is, the Chinese labor laws put the workers at a disadvantageous position in which the workers' overtime pay is not legally guaranteed by law and can be docked by their employers; in addition, their contracts with companies were mostly built upon verbal agreements, which were hard to use as evidence to protect their legitimate interests if there was a legal dispute with their

⁴² Lunar New Year is when Chinese reunite with family and celebrate the new year. People usually buy gifts and send money to their younger and older family members as a way to fulfill their familial duty.

employers.⁴³ Unfortunately, this was the working environment for workers in China until 2008 when the situation of laborers became slightly better.⁴⁴

To put modern Chinese history in a nutshell, the discourse of *tasting bitterness* changed its original meaning from glorious self-sacrifice during the socialist era into both a dominant ideology and a narrative that the government today uses to rationalize the unarticulated easiness of lower-class citizens in China. As noted by Dirlík and Harvey, the experience of the Chinese lower class in the reform era and onwards discloses the serious exploitation and the increasing wealth gap beneath the China's rise. Building on that, these larger structural problems also translated into the hardships Chinese workers suffered in Africa. However, the experience of hardships was not limited to the lower-class workers and subcontractors in Africa. In other words, SOEs and large companies also suffered hardships. As I discuss in the following sections, the hardships Chinese companies suffered in African construction sector resulted from multiple factors, but mainly due to their own negligence and miscalculations. For example, when SOEs and their subcontractors blindly applied the Chinese working model that puts productivity and profit over workers' rights to African workers regardless of the change of context, they got entangled in lawsuits and their exploitive labor practices placed the companies in an antagonistic relationship with local communities and the local government. The migrant laborers, on the other hand, encountered hardships that they had no control over, such as the extreme weather, the more serious exploitation of their rights as laborers, and discrimination from their educated counterparts.

⁴³ Driessen, Miriam. *Tales of Hope, Tastes of Bitterness: Chinese Road Builders in Ethiopia* (HKU Press, 2019). P54

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* P137

Suzhi and Tasting Bitterness

Based on the previous discussion of *tasting bitterness*, in this section, I discuss how Chinese employers used the *suzhi* (quality) discourse, which is complementary with *tasting bitterness*, to justify their exploitation of workers and to hold the lower-class laborers responsible for misrepresenting the educated and disciplined Chineseness constructed by the higher-level managers.

One function of *suzhi* is to differentiate the people within the Chinese community by their education level, age, and cultural background. The goal is to differentiate two groups of people—high-*suzhi* managers/workers and low-*suzhi* migrant workers—so the exploitation of low-*suzhi* workers by high-*suzhi* managers and workers is justified. For example, in Ethiopia, Chinese private companies such as Wuhe and Qimo were often portrayed by workers of SOEs as low-*suzhi* peasant work units for their shared rural backgrounds and lack of education.⁴⁵ The divisions, however, did not just exist between SOEs and private companies as they also existed within companies. Even in SOEs where the majority was educated workers, those who were less educated and spent days with local workers on site were considered by their more educated co-workers as inferior and were called “people recruited from outside.”⁴⁶ Another important factor in differentiation is the time period in which one has started working for his or her company in Africa. In general, older generations came to Africa as early as the 1970s and were more disciplined and educated in every aspect than most younger workers. Their university education, specialist training, and training in social etiquette and intercultural communication conducted relatively harmonious interactions with Africans, compared to today’s Chinese-African interactions which are marked by clashes.

Lamented by a 52-year-old site manger Liang Jun who served in RCE, a Chinese SOE, for decades:

⁴⁵ Ibid. P53

⁴⁶ Ibid. P57

The first Chinese who came here had a high *suzhi*. Most of them were graduates from Tsinghua [University] and other good universities. Now my company employs peasant workers as supervisors. They don't belong to our company. Our first group was of a high level... The assistant manager of the AA project (the Addis-Adama expressway), for instance, was part of our first batch. Nowadays graduates from Tsinghua do not want to come to Africa anymore.⁴⁷

Liang used the term *suzhi*, a Chinese word for human quality that is based on the level of education and training one has received, to distinguish between the early and late arrivals. For the higher-level managers in RCE, high *suzhi* was usually considered as an ideal quality of Chinese workers as it indicated high efficiency of workers which eventually led towards higher productivity for the company.⁴⁸ In practice, however, not all Chinese fit in this model. The top management team of RCE was aware of this reality and they chose to promote a monolithic Chineseness, which is another word for high *suzhi*, by regulating the low-*suzhi* people's social behaviors and by shaping their working attitude through penalty policy.

Defining *suzhi* is hard as it is an abstract term constructed by many immeasurable standards. For example, in Liang's lament, *suzhi* is related to one's level of education and training, but older generations who have college education and high social etiquette are sometimes considered as low-*suzhi* by younger generations.⁴⁹ Li Yang, a 27-year-old worker in a state-owned enterprise, complained about older generations of Chinese workers who were loud and impolite to Ethiopian workers.⁵⁰ I suggest we should see *suzhi* as a contested discourse and focus on its relationship with *tasting bitterness*, as well as the Chinese working culture and labor practices, rather than focus on the definition of the word *per se*. Here I argue that defining *suzhi* is less important than articulating its function of instilling the idea that *suzhi*, similar to education, can be improved through practicing one's ability to taste bitterness. But we should

⁴⁷ Ibid. P56

⁴⁸ Ibid. P113

⁴⁹ Ibid. P56

⁵⁰ Ibid. P57

be cautious about using such moralistic tones when speaking of *suzhi* that it justifies employers' denigrating attitude towards workers.

In his speech in 2009, the former prime minister Wen Jiabao emphasized the importance of improving one's *suzhi* through *tasting bitterness*. He commented on two university students' graduation speeches, in which they expressed their ambition of serving the country by serving the local government in Tibet, that "one should dare to taste bitterness rather than complaining about bitterness. Hardships usually construct a virtuous character who is useful for his or her family, country, and peoples."⁵¹ In Wen's comment, he considered high *suzhi*, instead of a better life, as the award of *tasting bitterness*. This change of concept adds an abstract value to one's bitterness and justifies the exploitation of workers by high-*suzhi* employers who are capable of helping their workers to improve their *suzhi*.

Building on the two brief sections above, the sections below provide details to explain why applying the similar *suzhi* discourse and Chinese exploitative working model, which worked well within the Chinese community, to Ethiopian workers brought Chinese companies into lawsuits and their projects to failure. The failed projects and problematic relationship with local workers are what I consider as the harsh reality that most Chinese SOEs were dealing with in the construction sector in Ethiopia. Through the lens of this reality, the hardships that some Chinese endured allows us to revisit the criticism about Chinese presence in Africa as colonial and imperial.

Arrival in Ethiopia

One goal of this section is to provide a different narrative, rather than to regard the Chinese presence in Africa as neo-colonial and neo-imperial. Another goal is to contextualize the Chinese working model, as well as *tasting bitterness* and *suzhi* within the context of Ethiopia to demonstrate that when the employers conducted more exploitive labor practices on workers, two different results were produced:

⁵¹ 李 斌, and 吴 晶. "温总理对话清华学子: 人要勇于吃苦而丝毫不叫苦." People's Daily, 4 May 2009, <http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/1024/9228981.html>.

African workers were rebellious in response to exploitation and protected themselves using labor laws (as I elaborate in the section “The Failure of Chinese Model in Ethiopia”), and Chinese workers in private companies experienced more serious exploitation than back home. As Driessen notes:

Upon arrival, Chinese employees hand in their passports, which are kept with their other personal documents in the head office in the capital city. Throughout the period of employment, the Chinese employer is their sole caretaker and provider of housing, transport, food, medicine, daily utensils, and entertainment. As such, their employer has full command over the mobility and the lifestyle of its employees and creates in them a sense (or illusion) of security.⁵²

These words describe lower-class Chinese laborers’ migration to Africa through acquaintance networks (*guanxi*). What Driessen does not mention, however, is that most migrant workers had high expectations that they were be able to get out of the domestic exploitation and could recoup their investment of time and hard work in Africa by the higher salaries offered by the companies. In reality, however, their expectations did not come true. By handing over their passport to their employers and relying on the employers as their sole caretakers without a binding and protective contract, the workers became more vulnerable to exploitation. In Ethiopia, the Chinese workers had to work seven days a week from 7:00 in the morning to 7:00 in the evening and only had little time to relax and sleep. This new working schedule was more tiring than the ones in China where workers started working as early as 8:30 in the morning and had multiple work breaks before they got off work at 6:00 in the evening. Despite that, the overseas Chinese workers in Ethiopia still believed that their three to five years hard work would convert into “respect, status, and security” at home.⁵³ A simplified version of the Chinese workers’ wish list from RCE can be glimpsed here:

My hopes are not at all unreasonable, I think. I hope my future life will be stable [*wending*]. I hope to have a stable family, just live a good life in China... I don’t necessarily have to earn a lot of money. I don’t have to drive a fancy car. Happiness for me is a stable family and a stable income. (Accountant, male, 29 years old; June 7, 2012)

⁵² Driessen, Miriam. *Tales of Hope, Tastes of Bitterness: Chinese Road Builders in Ethiopia* (HKU Press, 2019). P35

⁵³ *Ibid.* P40

I will have a stable income that is enough to provide for my family, to buy food and clothes. That's it. My demands are not high. I will have a house and a car. This car I will be able to drive myself, of course... I hope my child will do well in school, so that I don't have to worry. Just no worries, then everything is fine. (Surveyor, male, 31 years; June 17, 2012)⁵⁴

Note how the two interviewees both used the word “stable” (*wending*) to describe their ideal life. Their goals in Ethiopia were not to pan for gold but to use their hard work and the overseas money to make their lives in China more stable and tolerable in the face of fast-changing domestic circumstances. To achieve a stable life, they were committed to *tasting bitterness* that they related their stability of life to their diligence and their ability to endure hardships in Africa.

In addition to the heavy workload mentioned earlier, the Chinese workers in Ethiopia endured hardships from the physical violence of their employers, the dullness of repetitive work, and the loneliness of life in Ethiopia. Indeed, when they were away from their families and lived in a prison-like compound with great perseverance for years, they were like a group of hermits who lived far away from the rapid progress in China and cut themselves off from the rest of the world. As noted by Driessen, the overseas Chinese workers expressed a sense of homesickness when they chatted with each other during their spare time in the evening. Their homesickness was exacerbated when they noticed there was no place to spend their salaries, and the lack of entertainment in Ethiopia. In other words, even though they made much more money than their Chinese counterparts, their lives in Ethiopia did not improve, at least for the time being, any more than before.

Ideally, their lives in China will improve in 5 to 10 years—when they complete their contract in Ethiopia and when the higher salaries promised are fulfilled by their employers. However, the unexpected always happens. That is, other factors beyond their control can change the result of their progress. For example, when the workers of some private companies couldn't claim the wages promised from their employers and defend their legal rights as workers due to China's poor legal system, they had no choice

⁵⁴ Ibid. P33

but to return to China empty-handed. As noted by Driessen, the workers of Qimo and Wuhe often faced wage arrears and physical violence from their bosses. In some cases, the workers had to use extreme means to claim their wages when these wages were continuously delayed by the company. One truck driver of Wuhe, for example, bought a hand grenade to frighten his boss into paying his overdue salary.⁵⁵ Wage arrears was not unfamiliar to Chinese workers as they already experienced it back home. However, it became worse with other exploitation as the workers became more vulnerable after handing over their passports and living in a foreign country where the protections of weak Chinese labor laws became weaker. One worker reports:

On the Serdo project [in Afar regional state] there was a company similar to this one, a small construction firm. The boss of that company, Lao Zhao, was a specialist in beating Chinese. After recruiting Chinese staff members from China, he started beating them. The Chinese who got beaten did not dare to demand their salaries when they returned home. They did not know what to do. There was nobody who could sue him and win. His beating was cruel. He beat about twenty Chinese. He took every opportunity to beat them.⁵⁶

Though it may be an exaggeration to say that Lao Zhao took every opportunity to beat his workers, the habit of beating workers did exist and happened very often in private companies like Wuhe. In fact, beating is typically preceded by two other punishments, the deprivation of food and sleep, together constituting a three-step punishment method.⁵⁷ The case of Wuhe epitomizes the behavior of Chinese private companies in Africa, which demonstrates that Chinese workers do not always make money in Africa through their own hard work and ability to endure hardships. Furthermore, the case shows an essential problem with the narrative of *tasting bitterness*, as the narrative relates success only to hard work and ignores other existing factors, such as unreliable employers, that can change the result of one's experience in Africa.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid. P54

⁵⁷ Ibid. P55

The workers' situation in SOEs was slightly better than in the private companies, since the SOEs were supported by the Chinese state and were able to "infinitely" loan money from the state banks, such as the Bank of China and the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China, so they could pay the workers' salaries on time even when they were losing money in Africa. However, even though RCE was known for better treatments in all aspects compared to its subcontractors, its goal, similar to Wuhe's, was still deeply built on the company's profit maximization at the cost of the workers' rights. Aware of Lao Zhao's physical violence and exploitation against his workers, the RCE as the regulator and the manager of the whole project in Ethiopia did not take action against the malpractices of Lao Zhao. The main reason for RCE's inaction was that it considered (1) changing subcontractors would not change the status quo, as the exploitation of workers is common among private companies, (2) and it is too costly and time consuming to find alternatives to the existing subcontractors.⁵⁸

Based on the lower-class workers' experiences in Ethiopia, I conclude that the workers in the construction sector provide a different narrative than the Chinese presence in Africa as neo-colonial and neo-imperial. That is, the Chinese lower-class workers aimed to gain basic dignity as human beings, security, and a normal life in China rather; they were not colonizers pursuing prestige and richness. In addition, just like the Africans, the Chinese workers were the victims of larger structural problems, such as exploitation from capitalist entrepreneurs and the cutthroat competition in the global capitalist system.

The Failure of the Chinese Model in Ethiopia

In the previous section, I provided a summary of the lower-class Chinese construction workers' lives in Ethiopia. Building on the microhistory of the Chinese workers, my focus in this section is on the microhistory of Chinese companies in Africa as it helps us further examine the Chinese presence in Africa outside the scope of macrohistory that describes Chinese as a neo-colonial and neo-imperial force in

⁵⁸ Ibid.

Africa. I will approach the companies' experience in Africa by observing the hardships they encountered and analyze the causes for their hardships, which leads to the discussion of larger structural problems with China's rise and within the global capitalism.

To understand why RCE and its subcontractors encountered hardships in Tigray, it is necessary to quickly refer to Arif Dirlik's discussion on the so-called Chinese model as it touches on the cause for the Chinese companies' poor relationship with the local government. Briefly, Dirlik attributes China's economic success to the "Chinese model" in which the central government's strong control over the market allows it to privatize public resources and human resources and use the resources as leverages to generate economic profits.⁵⁹ What Dirlik soft pedals in using the "Chinese model" to explain China's economic success is the importance of fiscal decentralization to foreign investments and local market regulations. By definition, fiscal decentralization is when the central government gives more autonomy and authority to the local government in terms of local development while securing its fiscal power by extracting part of the local government's tax revenues through tax sharing system.⁶⁰ The benefit of transferring power to local government is that it gives more flexibility to the local government in responding to foreign investment as it does not have to go through the long-winded procedures to get the central government's permission. In addition, local governors tend to be more familiar with the local situation and are therefore better judges for the viability of foreign investment plans and their effects on the local community.

In some cases, when dealing with foreign investors, local government even gives up some legal rights to guarantee the operations of the foreign enterprises. Here, I argue that fiscal decentralization shapes a unique relationship between the local government and companies in China in which the local government is always in favor of companies rather than workers whom it sees as no more than human

⁵⁹ Dirlik, Arif. *Complicities: The Peoples Republic of China in Global Capitalism*. Prickly Paradigm Press, 2017.

⁶⁰ Driessen, Miriam. *Tales of Hope, Tastes of Bitterness: Chinese Road Builders in Ethiopia* (HKU Press, 2019). P152

capital. While this relationship is productive for economic development, I argue that it exacerbates the workers' poor conditions within the authoritarian capitalist market in China. Now the workers not only have to deal with the exploitation from their employers but also from the government. But the Chinese workers rarely resist the exploitation of the government and their employers. Even when they do file a legal complaint against the employer or the government, they are more likely to lose the lawsuit in the face of strong coalition between the government and the companies.

In this light, what the Chinese companies did not understand about the Tigray local government's counterintuitive reaction to their investment in the local community was that the government tried to balance the good of having foreign investment with the good of preserving workers' rights.⁶¹ From their perspectives, workers are capital for economic development and should not be given priority, which was why they thought exploitation of workers was allowed in the first place. Seeing the local government's balancing act, the manager of Wuhe complained about doing business in Ethiopia that they do not have the full support of the local government.⁶²

Although RCE and its subcontractors were responsible for their own hardships in Ethiopia, as they blindly presumed that the Tigray government would cater to their needs regardless of the change of context, the hardships they endured from the local government's animosity and non-cooperation also resulted from the problems within the Ethiopian government system. That is, the Ethiopian central government's opinions about development often did not fit into the local context or meet local needs. For example, when the central government gave RCE the permission to build the road, the Tigraian road authorities were not informed about the details such as design, employment of workers, and construction time, and were left outside the decision-making and planning of the road.⁶³ As a result, when RCE and its

⁶¹ Ibid. P154

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid. P155

subcontractors were building the road, the local authorities complained about the width and the color of the asphalt, which was too light and would look dirty in long run.⁶⁴

As noted by Driessen in his fieldwork in Tigray, such dissatisfaction with Chinese sometimes translated into bogus information that was fabricated by the local authorities to make things difficult for them. For example, a Chinese engineer once received a phone call from the director of an Ethiopian central governmental roads institution who was told by other two regional government representatives that “the newly laid asphalt of the Alamata section had been washed away.”⁶⁵ Concerned about this situation, the engineers went to the scene but only found out that the asphalt was fine. This case shows that, while the RCE and its subcontractors were in good relationship with the Ethiopian central government, this relationship did not continue at the local level because of the two administrations’ disagreement on local development, as well as the local government’s detachment from the construction project. At this point, it is worth noting that, even though the Chinese local governments have the regional administrative power to regulate the foreign investments, they have always to follow the central government’s instructions in any circumstances.

Because the Ethiopian central government couldn’t control the local administrations as it should, the local government often played a more important role in dealing with Chinese investors as they could decide whether to lead the project to success depending on its relationship with the companies. In this sense, the failures of RCE and its subcontractors were not because they were unaware of the importance of local government to their projects, but because they ignored the fact their positions as foreigners in Tigray were not the same as a Korean company in China -- who were privileged and encouraged by the local government to invest and develop in local industries so their mutual economic profit could be maximized.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid. P156

Entangled in Lawsuits

To further elucidate why RCE and its subcontractors encountered hardships in Ethiopia, in this section, I delve into the Chinese companies' exploitive labor practices against the backdrop of a protective legal system for the Ethiopian laborers.

As opposed to Chinese workers, who couldn't resist exploitation from their employers, Ethiopian workers used local laws to protect themselves and charged the employers with violations of workers' rights.⁶⁶ Indeed, clashes in workplace encountered by companies such as Qimo and Wuhe were caused when the Chinese employers blindly applied the Chinese working model to Ethiopia where workers are protected by the local government and workers' union. For that matter, Chinese employers were often mired in lawsuits and their efforts to keep the efficiency and productivity of the local workers in line with their Chinese counterparts in China was counterproductive.

Qimo Construction learned Ethiopian labor law the hard way. Qimo had initially refused to hire a lawyer as it considered that the commission fees would be higher than the potential fines of lawsuits.⁶⁷ However, after seeing an increasing number of charges against its violations of labor rights and paying ETB 1 million for the lawsuits, the company had no option but to hire a part-time local lawyer.⁶⁸ Of all the charges against Qimo, the company was mainly charged with illegal dismissal, docking of wages, and overtime wage arrears.⁶⁹ These kinds of charges might not arise within the Chinese community as Chinese workers accepted the exploitation from their employers by holding onto the hope offered by the ideology of *tasting bitterness*. On the other hand, most Ethiopian workers, who did not accept the Chinese interpretation of success and hard work (*suzhi* and *tasting bitterness*), tended to be rebellious and disobedient in response to the Chinese employers' act of exploitation. For example, when Li Hongde, an

⁶⁶ Driessen, Miriam. *Tales of Hope, Tastes of Bitterness: Chinese Road Builders in Ethiopia* (HKU Press, 2019). P132

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* P135

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

expatriate manager, required both the Chinese and Ethiopian workers to fully dedicate to production so the company could make profits, most of his Ethiopian workers went absent from work on Saint Michael's Day as they valued their religion and personal affairs over their temporary job.⁷⁰ This mindset goes against the Chinese working model, which requires the companies and individual workers to carry out the project for low fees and short time.

What exacerbated Qimo's situation in Ethiopia was its lack of local legal knowledge, which was symptomatic of the situation of most Chinese construction companies in Africa. From Qimo's perspective, labor laws couldn't protect the laborers' rights, as it was the case in China. What surprised Qimo in Ethiopia was the fact that there was a complete and protective legal system in Ethiopia that restrained their exploitive labor practices. In a similar manner to Qimo, few Chinese companies had actually read the local labor proclamation and the majority's labor practices are founded upon established practices within the Chinese community.⁷¹

Even for the few companies that actually read the local labor proclamation, their reading of the proclamation was often selective because of intentional omissions in translation. Driessen explains: "Rather than adapting their labor practices to the law, it seemed as if the translator of the document had adjusted the law to Chinese labor practices."⁷² In Qimo's case, there were 145 articles missing out of a total of 193 articles of the original Ethiopian Labor Proclamation.⁷³ The missing articles were considered sensitive issues by management and were omitted to ensure the productivity of workers and efficiency of their work. For example, the first ten articles, which required employers to generate the type of employment and the rate of wages in written form, were missing and only verbal agreement between employers and workers could be found.⁷⁴ In terms of policies about overtime work, some key articles, such as Article 67, were included in the Chinese version but the circumstances in which overtime work

⁷⁰ Ibid. P82

⁷¹ Ibid. P137

⁷² Ibid. P138

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

was allowed was missing.⁷⁵ The articles about “Occupational Safety, Health and Working environment” were missing as well as they included the safety of working environment and that of the working procedures, which in Chinese employers’ eyes were unnecessary and even troublesome in maximizing productivity.⁷⁶

This selective reading of Ethiopian Labor Proclamation demonstrates Qimo’s exploitive labor practice which put the profit maximization of the company over the rights of the workers. Qimo’s exploitive practice was the main cause for its disputes with the Ethiopian workers and the lawsuits, as the workers and the employers disagreed on the working time, the payment, and workers’ rights. In addition, the lack of written contract disadvantaged Qimo in defending itself in the court when its employees tried to take advantage of its lack of legal knowledge. Qimo’s case is an epitome of many other Chinese companies in Ethiopia who were mired in lawsuits due to their exploitive labor practices and lack of local legal knowledge. As a result, there were 99 cases in which Chinese companies were charged with violation of labor rights since 2008, and there was only one case in which a company won.⁷⁷

That is, however, not to say that Ethiopian workers were merely innocent victims of Chinese exploitation and that they deserved justice from judicial system. On the contrary, according to Merriam Driessen, stealing, absenteeism, and blackmailing were common among Ethiopian workers in Qimo, but the company lost those cases as a result of their exploitive labor practices and unfamiliarity with the process of local regulations.⁷⁸ Instead of going through the legal procedures to solve those cases which they could win, Chinese employers took actions themselves using illegal layoffs and sometimes physical violence to punish workers for stealing and blackmailing. Those actions might work in China, as the local government allowed the companies to sidestep legal procedures for the sake of productivity and

⁷⁵ Ibid. P141

⁷⁶ Ibid. P145

⁷⁷ Ibid. P136

⁷⁸ Ibid. P132

efficiency. But similar actions were counterproductive in Ethiopia where the local government tried to balance the foreign investment with the workers' rights.

A brief overview of Qimo's case demonstrates that Chinese companies lacked legal knowledge and blindly applied the Chinese working model in Africa regardless of the change of context. What their hardships in Ethiopia reveal is the larger problem within the Chinese working model: that employers ensure productivity and profits at the cost of workers' rights. Although this model worked within the Chinese community as the Chinese workers were used to the exploitation from their employers and the Chinese legal system was not protective for the laborers, the Ethiopian workers resisted the exploitation from their employers as a result of both the protective local labor laws and their disagreement with the ideology of *tasting bitterness* and *suzhi*.

Now, based on the discussion in "The Failure of the Chinese Model in Ethiopia" and this section, when I revisit the criticism about Chinese presence in Africa as neo-colonial, I note that the criticism confuses the capitalist nature of the Chinese companies in Africa with neo-colonialism. By saying Chinese companies are neo-colonial in Africa, the criticism overlooks the local government's role and influence in regulating Chinese companies and on project outcome. In other words, China cannot be neo-colonial when it does not possess a dominant control over the region. The criticism also overlooks the power of Ethiopian workers who used laws to protect themselves from the exploitation from their Chinese employers. With all these restrictions, Chinese state actors' exploitive labor practice were restricted, and their project often turned out to be unproductive.

Chapter Two: Chinese Migrants in African Agriculture

In this chapter, I will further examine China's presence in Africa by viewing different individual cases in the agriculture sector through Edwin Kangyang Lin's framework of *small pond migration theory* and Hein Mallee's *habitus and practice*, in addition to Miriam Driessen's *tasting bitterness* discussed earlier, to shed a new light on Chinese migrants' migration intentions. The main goal of this chapter is to see whether Chinese individual migrants' experience in Africa is comparable to that of the lower-class laborers in the state sector. Using four case studies below, I argue that, even though the individual migrants were independent from the Chinese state's project in Africa, their particular experiences with enduring hardships and their viewpoints on *tasting bitterness* were consonant with the experiences and memories of the Chinese community in Africa.

Context and History

Examining today's Chinese entrepreneurs' presence in Africa should take account of a long historical movement of the Chinese diaspora globally along with the challenges and opportunities the diaspora faced. Although the earliest Chinese migration started between the 10th and 15th century, the Chinese mass migration, also known as coolie migration, did not happen until 19th and early 20th century.⁷⁹ The historical context for the mass emigration between the 19th and early 20th century is based on the Chinese civil war and Sino-Japanese wars which spurred Chinese from Fujian and Canton to migrate overseas for survival. Driven by the need for money and security, the majority of migrants moved to countries such as Singapore, Britain, America, and Canada, where the labor demand was desperate due to the abolishment of slavery and the need for capitalist expansion.⁸⁰ South Africa became one of those

⁷⁹ Lin, Edwin. "“Big Fish in a Small Pond”: Chinese Migrant Shopkeepers in South Africa.” *International Migration Review*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2014.

⁸⁰ Norton, Henry Kittredge. *The story of California from the earliest days to the present*. AC McClurg & Company, 1913.

migrants' destinations in the mid-19th century and is de facto one of the most important cases for understanding the holistic Chinese migration overseas today.

Starting in 1978, when the Chinese government loosened the migration restriction and advocated “going out” policy, which allowed individuals to migrate freely both in the domestic and overseas, Chinese overseas migration groups became more diverse than the previous state-led migrations.⁸¹ Depending on the migrants' social status and background in China, they chose different migration destinations correlated with their own interests that did not line up with the government goals. Most rich migrants fell into category of South-North migrations as they chose developed countries such as the United States, Canada, and Britain as their migration destinations, while the less wealthy migrants, mostly lower-class, fit in South-South migration in which they chose to migrate to developing and underdeveloped regions as South Africa, Thailand, and Malaysia.

Given the diversity of Chinese migrants and their destination choices, my focus here is on the lower class's South-South migrations, specifically the Chinese lower class who migrated to Africa. While this group was mostly constructed by the lower class, as observed in interviews by Miriam Driessen and Howard French, their development trajectories in Africa were utterly different on account of their diverse regional, educational, and social backgrounds. In addition, what further complicated the Chinese migrants in Africa was the unreliable data of the Chinese diaspora in Africa since the records of Chinese migrants in Africa varied considerably between each institute. The discrepancy in the data, according to Cook *et al*, was because few nations kept reliable statistics on them, making the term “overseas Chinese” extremely abstract.⁸²

⁸¹ Steve Wang, Lin Wanxia (19 November 2016). "Hunger for foreign know-how propels surge in Chinese ODI". www.atimes.com. Retrieved 21 November 2016.

⁸² Cook, Seth, et al. “Chinese Migrants in Africa: Facts and Fictions from the Agri-Food Sector in Ethiopia and Ghana.” *World Development*, vol. 81, 2016, pp. 61–70., doi:10.1016/j.worlddev.2015.11.011.

Methods

Why did Chinese migrants immigrate to Africa, which was seen by most Chinese as more dangerous and less developed than China? To this question, the study of Chinese migrations to South Africa by Lin uses *small pond migration theory* to shed light on the Chinese migration intentions. *Small pond migration theory* is, in his words, a way of understanding the motivation to “move to a lesser developed country or region to take advantage of less competition and/or characteristics of the receiving place which effectively increases the value of their existing social, economic, and human capital.”⁸³

The increased effectiveness of their existing capital, which directly resulted in an increase in one’s socioeconomic status, was what Chinese migrants wanted to achieve by moving to South Africa. Although they may not earn more money than they did in China, the increased effectiveness of their capital in a less developed and less competitive society did in fact allow them to gain more freedom and mobility in life. According to Lin, the freedom and mobility are two non-economic benefits of migration that incentivized migrants to South Africa. For example, when business was not going well for Chinese migrants in South Africa, those Chinese migrants still enjoyed the benefit of living in an English-speaking country and being their own boss who can set their own hours and wages.⁸⁴

Lin’s research on non-economic incentives is creative as it complements the neo-classical and neo-liberal views, which focus on people’s rational thinking about economic loss and gain in explaining migration intentions. While neo-classical and neo-liberal perspectives are able to explain some migration intentions using examples of early birds who arrived in the market before it got saturated and made money by opening a store and a restaurant, the economic approaches fail to explain why the latecomers, who have less chance to achieve business success compared to early birds, still chose to come to and stay in South Africa. Lin argues that, to fill that void, the majority of Chinese migrants in South Africa who

⁸³ Lin, Edwin. ““Big Fish in a Small Pond’: Chinese Migrant Shopkeepers in South Africa” (*International Migration Review*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2014). P15

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* P106

lacked agency for upward social mobility back home, whether due to education level, work experience, or network (*guanxi*), valued the non-economic benefits as much as the rich Chinese did.⁸⁵ However, they were unable to achieve these non-economic benefits in China, as they were busy working for a living. In this light, South Africa did not only provide the early birds with economic opportunities; it also provided the agency for both the early birds and the latecomers to achieve upward mobility on non-economic interests.

Whereas Lin's *small pond migration theory* sheds light on the pull force that attracted Chinese migrants to Africa where it was seen by their friends and family as primitive and dangerous, Hein Mallee focuses on the push force that drove Chinese, both rich and poor, overseas. From Mallee's perspective, what is interesting about the mainland migrants is that even though their migration to South Africa was relatively new compared to Hong Kong and Taiwan, some of their migrations were historically contingent and driven by invisible social and cultural factors hiding beneath their economic interests.⁸⁶ Fujianese migrants, for example, are known for their unique culture of migration starting in the Ming Dynasty. At first, a minority of Qingtian inhabitants in Fujian started migrating to other parts of China to sell their stone carvings because of the province's mountainous geography which provided a rich source of pale-green soapstone but not an appropriate environment for farming.

Starting from domestic migration, a habitus of migration was formed in Fujian, and the villagers' successful stories of becoming rich through selling the stone carvings stimulated those who had not yet decided to follow the same path.⁸⁷ That domestic migration habitus later evolved into overseas migrations and developed a maritime tradition for Fujianese. The regional overseas migrations reached the peak during the first opium war in which the Qing government was forced by British to open five of its ports to Britain in the treaty of Nanjing.⁸⁸ Two of the five, Xiamen and Fuzhou, are located in Fujian province and

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Pieke, Frank N., and Hein Mallee. *Internal and International Migration: Chinese Perspectives* (Routledge, 2016).

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* P164

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* P161

the enforced opening of ports to the world helped Fujianese people to construct a long-term and continuous migration connection with other continents.⁸⁹ Later on, as the migration became mature, the latecomers were benefitted from their predecessors' network, which made migrations easier and more popular in the region. However, that migration culture was suppressed by the CCP from 1949 to 1978 as the government prohibited individual overseas migration.⁹⁰ From Mallee's perspective, the strict restrictions on migration back then could be the incentive for today's Fujianese migration to South Africa when the restrictions loosened.⁹¹

Combining Lin and Mallee's approaches to Chinese migrations at this point, the forces that triggered the current migration to Africa should be examined from two sides: with the static decades from 1949 to 1978 being the major push force and opportunities and high expectations about overseas life as the pull forces. When I apply the frameworks of Lin and Mallee to other parts of Africa where the Chinese presence is relatively recent and temporary, I notice that the frameworks help in looking beyond economic and national interests of Chinese migrations, even if they do not fully explain their migration intentions. Furthermore, the benefits of Lin and Mallee's frameworks are that they allow us to re-examine Western media stereotype built upon the criticism about Chinese being a colonial and imperialist force in Africa, which characterizes Chinese presence in Africa as land grabbing and empire building.⁹² In this chapter, I limit my study of Chinese migrations and their presence in Africa to the agricultural sector as this sector, together with the construction sector aforementioned, are the main targets of the popular discourse that describes China as a colonial and imperialist force in Africa. In addition, it will be unwise to make sweeping generalizations about all of the sectors in this brief study.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid. P29

⁹¹ Ibid. P159

⁹² Both Rex Tillerson and Hillary Clinton warned Africa to beware of China's new colonialism and accused China of grabbing African land to grow foods to feed Chinese. Their charges against China was proved false by a research team at the International Food Policy Research Institute and at John Hopkins University in 2018 (Bräutigam 2018).

Drawing from Lin and Mallee's frameworks, I use the case studies of different individual migrants in agricultural sectors in Ethiopia, Zambia, Namibia, and Mozambique to argue that although Lin's *small pond migration theory* is right about the importance of non-economic benefits and freedoms in Chinese migration decisions while it is also accurate in pointing out that Chinese migrants benefitted from an immediate increase in their capitals. However, he overlooks the fact that most Chinese migrants in Africa chose to not enjoy the non-economic benefits and freedoms associated with their self-employment. In a similar manner, Mallee's framework, while insightful in explaining why some regions had higher levels of migration than others and should be given credit in noticing the push force's role in migration decisions, does not specifically focus on Africa, where the migration groups were mainly lower-class, and fails to explain why some inland regions, such as Henan and Hunan that didn't have history of migration also played a large part in overseas Chinese community in Africa.

Alternatively, I suggest that we should borrow Driessen's *tasting bitterness* which I have discussed in Chapter One, to complement Lin's *small pond migration theory* and Mallee's *habitus and practice theory* in understanding Chinese migrants' lives in Africa and why they chose to not enjoy the non-economic benefits and freedoms they came to Africa for. Similar to the role of *tasting bitterness* in Chapter One that offers a different narrative to the popular perception that Chinese presence in Africa is colonial and imperial, I apply this framework to the Sino-African relationship at the individual level. By so doing, it allows me to further examine the nature of the Chinese presence in Africa.

Case Study: Tao, an Inexperienced Chinese Farmer in Ethiopia

In this section, I provide a brief case study as a test subject for Lin's *small pond migration theory*. The goal here is to look beyond the economic interests in Chinese migration intentions and to peer into the microhistory of the Chinese individual migrations.

Five years ago, a nineteen-year-old young man, Tao, moved to Ethiopia from Sichuan with his wife through his father-in-law's network. Coming to Ethiopia without a clear idea what he could do in agriculture, Tao first experimented growing mandarin orange, but the food need of the local Chinese community soon shaped his business and turned it into radish and cabbage production. During the time he was interviewed by Seth Cook *et al.* in 2015, Tao had a 10 ha-plot of land rented from the local government but only half of it was used to produce radish and cabbage.⁹³ The other half was covered by overgrown tall grass as he had not decided what to plant. Unlike his father-in-law who succeeded in Africa, Tao's farming business was not lucrative and could only persist because of his in-law's continuous investment. Despite that, his life quality in Ethiopia was still better than the most rural population in Sichuan who had to deal with the pressure from living up to the social standards in China. Compared to his contemporaries in China, Tao seemed to be free from the social expectations, such as owning a car and a house in the city, and his father in-law who had set up a textile mill in Ethiopia and had accrued enough capital to financially support him. Hence, he was less motivated to work hard and seemed to fully enjoy the freedoms associated with self-employment, such as flexible working hours and the exposure to a foreign culture. In his interview, he seemed to be proud of his fluent English-speaking skills that he obtained after coming to Ethiopia despite his high school education level.⁹⁴

When asked by the interviewer about why he chose farming in Ethiopia, Tao confided that he had no experience in farming when he grew up in Sichuan, but farming Chinese vegetables was a pressing need for the local Chinese community upon his arrival to Africa since the local market did not grow cabbage and radish that Chinese wanted.⁹⁵ In addition, farming was not an expensive business to start in Ethiopia so there was less to lose if he failed. In many respect, Tao's case sums up the situation of most Chinese farmers in Africa where they lacked farming experience prior to their arrival to Africa but saw

⁹³ Cook, Seth, et al. "Chinese Migrants in Africa: Facts and Fictions from the Agri-Food Sector in Ethiopia and Ghana." *World Development*, vol. 81, 2016, pp. 61–70., doi:10.1016/j.worlddev.2015.11.011.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

the business opportunities from the presence of a community of the Chinese diaspora. According to the demographic statistics, the number of Chinese in Ethiopia in 2016 was around 35,000 – 40,000 in comparison to one hundred million local population.⁹⁶ The existence of such a large Chinese community provided business opportunities for inexperienced farmers like Tao and pulled them to Ethiopia to cater to the increasing food demand of the local Chinese community.

Compared to the local farmers, the newcomers, though inexperienced, were more competitive in catering to Chinese community's need because the existence of large Chinese community added value to their cultural capital. With shared language and cultural values, people such as Tao had closer relationships with Chinese buyers, so that they usually took orders over the phone to sell their crops directly from their farms to the buyers' designated warehouses.⁹⁷ In addition, Tao told the interviewer that he was more advantageous than the local farmers in selling to the Chinese construction companies because of the irrigation system on his farm.⁹⁸ This technological advantage allowed him to meet the food demand of construction companies in the dry season when most local farmers would rest as it would be difficult to grow vegetables without an irrigation system.

However, despite his advantages in farming from increased capital and advanced technology, Tao's business was not going well. For one thing, he was complaining about the heavy workload of farming and the unmatched payoffs. For another, he couldn't solve the land tenure problems as the Ethiopian government forbade foreigners like Tao to own land. So even if he could make his farming business work in long run, he would have to deal with land ownership issues, and it was unlikely to prevent the government from reclaiming the land when he was unable to endure hardships. These hardships were posed to every foreign migrant who wanted to do agriculture in Africa, and they were not

⁹⁶ "China Empowers a Million Ethiopians: Ambassador." *ENCA*, 26 Jan. 2016, <https://www.enca.com/money/china-empowers-million-ethiopians-ambassador>.

⁹⁷ Cook, Seth, et al. "Chinese Migrants in Africa: Facts and Fictions from the Agri-Food Sector in Ethiopia and Ghana." *World Development*, vol. 81, 2016, pp. 61–70., doi:10.1016/j.worlddev.2015.11.011.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

unsolvable if one tried really hard to find the solutions. As I demonstrate in the following cases, when these problems came to other Chinese farmers who were more capable of enduring hardships, they overcame these problems and achieved success.

Case summary 1

Tao's case is an interesting one compared to those I discuss in rest of this chapter. Tao represents a second generation of middle-class Chinese who migrated from the rural part of Sichuan to Ethiopia to seek entrepreneurial opportunities while enjoying the non-economic benefits and increased capital associated with self-employment. While he gained capital by moving to a less developed country, he did not succeed because of his increased capital. Tao's failure was a result of his lack of knowledge about farming, which led to a rudimentary farming method, combined with his inability to endure the heavy workload of farming. Despite that, his quality of life in Ethiopia was better than many of his contemporaries in China who had to live in an overcompetitive environment and live up to the social standards (one has to have a car, a house, and a family to be considered as independent).

Building on Tao's case, when I revisited the argument about the Chinese presence in Africa as imperial and colonial, I notice that Tao and many others chose farming because it had a low start-up cost which allowed them to afford the cost of failures and to get familiar with the local circumstances before they shifted to another industry. Unlike Western media's portrayal of the activities of individual Chinese farmers in Africa as land-grabbing, Tao's rudimentary production method and limited knowledge about farming, in contrast to the state's modernized and advanced techniques and mechanized large-scale farming practices, limited the scale of his farming, leaving him only be able to cater to the need of local niche market. In addition, the agricultural sector did not appear to be attractive to the group of Chinese to which Tao belonged in the long run because the workload was heavy and the economic returns were low. As a result, many inexperienced Chinese farmers tended to leave agricultural business for quicker return

and more lucrative alternatives. That is not to say that their goals were solely about economic gains as they valued the freedoms associated with self-employment and enjoyed the experience in interacting with foreign culture as much as, or even more than, the economic gains as shown in Tao's case.

Liu Changming: A Successful Story in Zambia

As mentioned earlier in Chapter One, enduring hardships was not only an experience of Chinese diaspora in Africa, but it was also the case with the lower class in China where companies and the government exploited the lower class's rights to ensure productivity and profits. The similar experience suggests a connection between the two groups. In fact, the majority of the Chinese diaspora in Africa consists of lower-class Chinese who lack the agency for upward mobility and struggle with survival back home. Unlike Tao, who was from a middle-class family and was free from concerns about money and survival, their migrations were driven by a sense of insecurity resulting from fast development back home as well as the opportunity for upward mobility created by increased capital in Africa. In addition, what was shared by them, given their lower-class background, was their belief in the narrative of *tasting bitterness*, which tells the people to work hard so they will be rewarded, even if there are the external circumstances beyond their control that hinder their progress.

Liu Changming was one of those migrants. Frowny, hasty, and ill-mannered, Liu Changming possessed all the characteristics of a rural villager. But he was a risk taker. In 2006, Liu bought his first farmland in Zambia where he tied his own and his family's fate to this foreign country.⁹⁹ Although he didn't disclose how he solved the land tenure issue, it is likely that he obtained land ownership by becoming a Zambian citizen, considering he arrived in Zambia as early as 2002. By the time he received his first interview with Marc Francis and Nick Francis in 2009, he had already finished testing soil and installing fences for his chicken in his two farms, which he bought in 2006 and 2007 separately, and was

⁹⁹ *Tubi*, 1 Jan. 2011, tubitv.com/movies/478104/when_china_met_africa?utm_source=google-feed&tracking=google-feed.

on his way to work on the third one. When asked by Marc Francis why he chose to immigrate to Zambia, a place most Chinese saw as underdeveloped and primitive, he responded that “In China, I was just a common employee working for the government. My stipends and income are just enough to cover my family expenditures. But I am an employer here! You see the difference?”¹⁰⁰ Indeed, since immigrating to Zambia in 2002, Liu achieved an upward mobility in his social class in four years. Similarly to the first case in which Tao’s cultural capital increased after he migrated to Ethiopia, Liu’s migration to Zambia freed him from the cutthroat competition back home and made his capital more effective. His human capital, though not special in China, became valuable to his farming business in Zambia. On the day of the interview, he was demonstrating to his local employees how to plant seeds and loosen the soil so the crops would be able to grow fast and well. His technique was simple and could be easily found online, but the local Zambians’ lack of access to the internet prevented them from learning even basic farming skills. Liu’s on-site teaching became the locals’ only way to learn farming, and with that experience of working on Liu’s farm, workers could find employment as advanced workers on other farms.

What distinguished Liu’s farming from inexperienced farmers such as Tao was his field experience with seeding methods and knowledge about building and maintaining healthy soil that he obtained as he grew up in a farming family in Henan. These experiences are not something one can immediately learn from the internet as it takes time and much practice to figure out how to adjust the amount of water, fertilizer, and bug repellent to cater to the local climate. Having said that, if Liu were farming in China, even with this knowledge he would not succeed because the knowledge about farming was shared by other Chinese farmers, and individual farming was not profitable, competing against the domination of the big companies, both private and SOEs.

In a similar manner to his increased human capital as a farming expert and instructor, Liu’s economic capital also increased. In Zambia, he could save more money from the lower cost of living and had more chances to restart his business if he failed. Indeed, lower costs allowed him to accumulate

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

capital fast and purchase farming machines to generate higher productivity than traditional farming, which heavily relies on laborers. But even with the increased capital, it still took him four years to set up his first farm, a relatively long time that might lead people like Tao to give up and turn to other business. At this point, Lin's *small pond migration theory* cannot fully capture Chinese migration intentions as it falls short of explaining why migrants like Liu, who valued the non-economic benefits of living in Africa, persevered in farming while there was less difficult business that would have allowed him to have more time to enjoy the benefits of living in Zambia.

To fully understand Chinese migration to Africa, I argue that *tasting bitterness* provides a fuller narrative of Chinese migration stories. When applying *tasting bitterness* to Liu's case, I note that his ability to endure the hardships such as heavy workload and slow money returns distinguished him from people like Tao who gave up easily in the face of similar difficulties in agriculture. However, this is not to say that Liu's success should be solely attributed to his ability to endure hardships since the outcome of his business was overdetermined by the local laws, his negotiations with local knowledge, the existing Chinese diaspora community, and to a large extent, unpredictable contingencies, such as luck. Having said that, Liu was not fully aware of these underlying factors that led his business to success. When asked by the interviewer why he succeeded in farming in Zambia while others, specifically Indians and Africans, didn't, Liu responded that "we Chinese can taste bitterness. Our family responsibility is heavier than other countries' people: we have to take care of our parents on both sides and our children."¹⁰¹ One thing worth noting from his speech is that he used *tasting bitterness*, not his ability to endure hardships, as the explanation for his success and others' failures. While *tasting bitterness* seems interchangeable with enduring hardships as they both imply one's perseverance in face of difficulties, I argue that enduring hardships is only one process in *tasting bitterness*. The rest of *tasting bitterness* is defined by a sense of hope for a better life. Thus, for Liu, the narrative of *tasting bitterness* provided a much-needed hope that

¹⁰¹ Corben, Scott, and Solange Chatelard. "King Cobra and the Dragon." *Film*. <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/peopleandpower/2012/01/20121484624797945.html>. Accessed January 7 (2012): 2012

helped him get through the hardships he encountered in Zambia, and from his perspective, it distinguished him from others who cannot taste bitterness and failed in their business, such as Tao. In this light, even though *tasting bitterness* is a narrative that is more ideological than practical in the sense that it solely attributes success to one's hard work regardless of other factors, the narrative can indeed affect, if not decisively, the outcome of one's business.

Liu's words indicate that he was fully committed to the narrative of *tasting bitterness* upon his arrival in Zambia. What was at stake here was that, when he described his success, he only referred to the narrative of *tasting bitterness* instead of other factors he valued, such as his local network and his positive relationship with the buyers. In this light, when he witnessed a torrent of Chinese newcomers entering the Zambian agricultural market who threatened his business, he chose to work harder than before rather than developing his network advantage as an early bird. Building on that, I argue that Liu was trapped inside the narrative of *tasting bitterness* and that he considered the only way to achieve his end goals to be through his hard work. That is why he reacted to the torrent of newcomers by keeping up his hard work; he believed this was the way to avoid elimination from the market and to keep his currently affluent life. But, as I demonstrate below, that is not to say that he was unaware of the importance of other factors to his business.

Liu's success, to a large extent, can be attributed to his broad network in Zambia, which was crucial in ensuring his income and making him more competitive than other farmers who only sell products to limited groups of customers. Although Liu did not credit his success to his network, he was obviously aware of the importance of the network. For example, unlike Tao, who sold his crops to Asian customers only, Liu increased his economic gains by diversifying his customer groups and integrating himself into the local niche while also selling directly to the Chinese community.

As far as his relationship with the buyers is concerned, his entering into the market didn't change the competitiveness of the market because of the small size of his business, and he always consciously maintained a positive relationship with his customers, so that he would sometimes even give away his

benefits to win return customers. Indeed, he valued his positive relationship with his buyers and established a long-term partnership, which ensured the quantity of his sales.

Marc Francis reports that, in a local niche market where Liu was selling his chicken, when a Zambian woman came to him with 30 Zambian vacha (around 2.7 USD) for his four chicken that were worth 40 vacha in total, he bargained with the woman who begged him to sell her the chicken for 30 vacha.¹⁰² Although he repeated that the price is fixed, he eventually accepted the woman's offer with a bitter smile after seeing she was really short of 10 vacha.¹⁰³ This type of daily interaction in the local market indicates how Liu's business was dependent on local customers, as well as the importance of having a positive relationship with buyers. But the balance of this close Sino-Zambian individual relationship was threatened by a torrent of new migrants who entered Zambian agricultural market in 2008. Most of those newcomers entered agriculture for its low start-up cost and stayed in the agricultural sector temporarily to gain enough capital for them to shift to a more lucrative and easier industry, such as finance and private banking.¹⁰⁴ However, the influx of large-scale Chinese migrants concerned existing farmers like Liu. That was when Liu switched the hope of *tasting bitterness* to a cautionary warning. To keep his business running, he considered that he had to work hard to keep himself competitive in the market or he would fall back to his old status.

Seeing a group of 20 young Fujianese farmers who just arrived in Zambia selling chicken next to his booth, Liu seemed worried, but he told the interviewer that "the market is like a battlefield. It is about survival and competition are always there. Eventually, those who can taste bitterness will last longer. Their [newcomers'] entrance into the market is not a problem for me because they won't stay long."¹⁰⁵ Note how the narrative of *tasting bitterness* contained a different meaning to Liu in the face of newcomers. That is, he switched the hope offered by *tasting bitterness* to a warning that says if one

¹⁰² *Tubi*, 1 Jan. 2011, tubitv.com/movies/478104/when_china_met_africa?utm_source=google-feed&tracking=google-feed.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

cannot endure hardships, he or she will be eliminated from the market. From Liu's perspectives, most newcomers were less competitive than him in long run. Indeed, most new farmers were like Tao, who used agricultural business as a way to observe the local business environment and try out life in Zambia before they turned to other business.

But their arrival in Zambia and their existence in the market still posed some short-term problems. For one thing, the newcomers were not familiar with the local market rules and would likely break some in exchange for quick money. For example, to make quick profits from farming, the Fujianese chicken farmers next to Liu's booth sold their chicken slightly higher than the market price and were more likely to use anti-biotics and illegal drugs to ensure the health and shorten the growth cycle of chicken. Such illegal act were common in China when someone who was either inexperienced or immoral wanted to make quick money in the short run.¹⁰⁶ This type of potential malpractice and violation of market rules might damage the reputation of hard-working farmers like Liu who fed his chicken corns and wheat from his own farm and did his best to maintain a positive relationship with customers.

Inexperienced temporary farmers aside, there were farmers with long-term vision among the new migrants who could be Liu's potential competitors as they also possessed the advantage of increased capitals and a knowledge advantage in farming, even though Liu had the advantage of being an early bird for the time being. To preserve his success in farming in Zambia and the benefits and freedoms he earned through hard work, Liu believed that, if he continued working hard, he could become more resilient in the long run and could adapt to the market change. His mindset of working hard to stay competitive so he won't fall behind the newcomers in the farming business was reminiscent of the narrative of *tasting bitterness* since he believed that his survival could be guaranteed by his diligence.

At that point, I note that the narrative of *tasting bitterness* was changing its meaning for Liu, but its focus on one's hard work remained the same. At first, *tasting bitterness* offered hope for a better life

¹⁰⁶ “揭秘‘速生鸡’:一只鸡吃 18 种抗生素 40 天长 5 斤。” *People's Daily*, 19 Dec. 2012, <http://finance.people.com.cn/n/2012/1219/c1004-19946989.html>.

that required Liu to work hard to achieve. Later, in the face of newcomers, the hope it offered earlier switched to a cautionary warning that told Liu to work hard or he will lose his success. Additionally, *tasting bitterness* also offered Liu hope for the next generation, because it assumes that he can use his hard work to lay out a solid foundation for his children, so the children will encounter fewer hardships and live better lives. In an interview from 2011, Liu confided that his third farm, which he had not yet finished cultivating, was intended for his three children.¹⁰⁷ Liu wanted his children to stay in Zambia to avoid the cutthroat competition back in China and the exploitation of the lower class from the Chinese government and the companies. To my surprise, he was not opposed to interracial marriage with local Zambians, an openminded point of view considering his is one of those lost generations in China. Will his children have a better chance to enjoy life in Zambia than him? Liu would say yes, as he had faith in Zambia's future.

Case Summary 2

Building on Liu's case, I observe that *tasting bitterness*, as a narrative, carries a sense of hope that helped Liu endure hardships upon his arrival in Zambia. It was also used by Liu to understand his hardships and to distinguish his success from others' failures. Although the narrative per se is similar to the American Dreams in that it overlooks the importance of external circumstances to the progress of one's business, the narrative helps us examine and understand the mindset of some lower-class migrants. As observed from Liu's cases, lower-class Chinese were more faithful in *tasting bitterness* as they needed this narrative to make sense of the hardships they encountered and held onto the hope the narrative offered when overcoming hardships. On the other hand, the second generation of the middle class, such as Tao, who benefitted from middle-class status achieved by his family, had less faith in *tasting bitterness*

¹⁰⁷ *Tubi*, 1 Jan. 2011, tubitv.com/movies/478104/when_china_met_africa?utm_source=google-feed&tracking=google-feed.

since he had less incentive to endure hardships when his father-in-law already laid out a solid financial foundation for him.

What is interesting about Liu's case is that the narrative of *tasting bitterness* for him changed from enduring hardships to achieve a better life into a continuous commitment to hard work so he could avoid elimination from the market. In this narrative, *tasting bitterness* not only allows us to peer into the migrants' way of thinking when they endured hardships and how they understood their success and others' failures, but it also helps us notice the deep-rooted problem with this narrative. That is, if one buys the argument that success is only related to hard work, it is likely he or she will also agree with the argument that if one continues working hard, he or she will be free from elimination from the market. The problem with this logic is that it overlooks the existence of external circumstance that is out of one's control but will, to a large extent, affect the outcome. However, the lower-class Chinese, both domestic and overseas, were trapped inside this narrative that pushed them to constantly to work hard to search for security. The following case study, Hou Xuecheng, is a case in point.

Hou Xuecheng: A Successful Story in Namibia

To further investigate the microhistory of Chinese individual migrants in Africa through the lens of *tasting bitterness*, Hou Xuecheng's case below provides another narrative to examine how *tasting bitterness* became a shared narrative of lower-class Chinese migrants.

Before coming to Namibia, Hou made a living from an auto garage in Hubei, a northern province in China.¹⁰⁸ His life then was not affluent as he couldn't find a good job and his farming family couldn't offer him enough capital to start his own business. For that matter, when asked by Howard French why he came to Namibia, Hou complained about the lack of opportunities to get rich in China, despite the fast economic development of China in the past 42 years. This feeling of falling behind was shared by many

¹⁰⁸ French, Howard W. *China's Second Continent* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, Kindle Edition, 2014). P233

other lower-class Chinese, especially for Hou's generation, who witnessed the economic reform and the people who got rich from it. But not many around Hou thought about migrating to Africa as he did. After conducting research on Africa, Hou settled on Namibia with the faith that he could get rich in Namibia by investing all his money, around \$1,200, into agriculture, and by using his diligence and intelligence.¹⁰⁹

Although Hou believed in Namibia's agricultural market, when he arrived in Namibia for the first time, he did not plan on staying long-term and was not prepared for problems with his visa and immigration. As a result, when his visa was close to expiration, the immigration officers expelled him, and he returned the second time shortly after.¹¹⁰ But he was faithful in the narrative of *tasting bitterness*, so that he believed he could resolve the problems with his migration status in Zambia and achieve success after enduring hardships. Building on the experience of his first failure, he hired local lawyers to legalize his migration status and solve the visa issues, but those preparations did not work out when the local police, who were connected with local courts and the government, constantly blackmailed him for more money.¹¹¹ Soon, Hou ran out of money and was forced to hide in his friends' place from the harassment of those officers.¹¹² However, his hiding did not last very long, as the police started arresting the people whom he contacted after they couldn't find Hou. In the end, Hou was forced to come back to China to save money for his comeback to Namibia.¹¹³

The previous two failures made Hou aware that if he couldn't solve his visa issue there would be no business opportunity for him, so upon his third time arrival, he immediately bribed an immigration officer in exchange for the information of legitimizing his stay in Namibia.¹¹⁴ He was told by the officer that the only way to achieve it is getting married to a local woman. This might be an easier task for Hao if he were single, but the fact is that he was already married and the only solution to his immigration status

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. P235

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid. P236

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

placed him and his wife at home in an awkward position where they would have to choose whether to have a real divorce or hide their marriage from the Namibian woman. Hou's choice is unclear, but what we do know from the interview is that he did not divorce his wife in China while marrying a Namibian woman whom he did not love. To make everything look real to the immigration officers and local community, Hou held a decent wedding that invited many guests and had plenty of foods and drinks.¹¹⁵ Their life after the wedding was harmonious, and they even lived together for a year until his father-in-law demanded a grandchild from them. That was when the problems began. Hou didn't want to have an interracial baby with his Namibian wife because he thought the baby would make him "lose his face" in front of his Chinese families and friends. Because of his repulsive attitude, his in-laws started questioning his motivation in marriage and finally discovered the existence of his wife in China. From his interview, it is unclear whether his Namibian in-laws knew his marital status before their marriage, but his problematic marital status eventually made him pay the price. After he divorced his Namibian wife, he paid a large sum of alimony, including a new house and a large payment whose amount he didn't disclose.

In hindsight, Hou went through a lot of hardships to obtain the legal residency in Namibia, which was not seen as an ideal emigration destination by most people in China. His earlier experience in enduring hardships in Namibia is reminiscent of Liu's experience in Zambia, although Hou's hardship upon his arrival to Africa was not as much about farming as it was about his immigration status. When asked by Howard French why he was so obsessed with staying in Namibia, he responded that, "I'm Chinese and we have an expression that says you leap forward if there's an empty space. Empty spaces are there to be filled."¹¹⁶ His rhetoric of filling empty space is reminiscent of the Chinese government's discourse of "going to the countryside and mountain areas to generate development" during the cultural revolution.¹¹⁷ The government's intention was to initiate an inland development in areas that had bigger physical space but less human capital and economic development because of the severe living

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ 童辰, and 郭海峰. "知识青年到农村去." *Beijing Daily*, 26 July 1998.

environment. In Hou's case, the empty space represented the state of the market in which fewer competitors exist, a sharp comparison with the cutthroat competition in Chinese market. Indeed, it was these empty spaces in the market that offered a sense of hope within the narrative of *tasting bitterness* and inspired him to go through the hard times in Namibia -- a hope that let Hou see the chance of escaping poverty and becoming rich so his kids can have better lives and encounter fewer hardships when they try to start their business.

Was Namibia worth enduring hardships? As Hou explained to the reporter about how migrating to Namibia changed his social status, he pointed at the cars he owned and said that "in China, I was a nobody, but now I am rich... Do you think if I were in China, I could have cars like these?"¹¹⁸ Hou used his successful business in agriculture and his possession of a big, four-wheel-drive Toyota pickup and a late-model top-level Volvo to prove the worthiness of enduring hardships in Namibia. Indeed, compared to his old friends in China who couldn't afford one car, Hou's migration story was a successful one. But, similar to Liu, he still worked as hard as he had used to and did not seem to enjoy the non-economic freedoms associated with self-employment after he achieved self-employment and succeeded in his farming business.¹¹⁹

Namibia was well-known for its world-class parks and beaches, but he always complained that there's no time to visit. Whether he truly didn't have time or it was just merely a euphemistic way of saying that he is not interested, Hou, Liu, and many of their contemporaries were always in a rush to go after business opportunities even though they already became successful in their own terms and were old enough to slow down to enjoy their life. Based on their shared time and background in which they grew up, what explains their constant pursuit to make money and their work ethic is a class characteristic.

In short, their generations, known as the lost generations, were raised in a chaotic period when students dropped out of schools and the national economy was stagnant. After the Cultural Revolution,

¹¹⁸ French, Howard W. *China's Second Continent* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, Kindle Edition, 2014). P233

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

they were exposed to the progressive social circumstance during the reform era, but they were unable to take advantage of the changes in the society as they were less competitive than the college graduates and city residents on the job markets.¹²⁰ For that reason, most of them chose to do menial labor as an expedient way to support their family. While life was difficult for the lower class, people could still make a living if they worked hard and were capable of enduring hardship. But that situation soon changed as the price for necessities and housing soared, making lower-class people unable to afford the things they used to have and generating a sense of insecurity that eventually pushed them to overseas destinations, such as Africa.¹²¹ However, moving to Africa did not get rid of that sense of precarity, as observed in Liu's case. The insecurity about falling behind to newcomers and the faith in *tasting bitterness* were what made Liu continue working hard even after he gained an upward mobility in his class status.

It is unclear, however, whether Hou was troubled by newcomers in Namibia from his interview. While the increasing Chinese migration to Africa could be a concern for Hou, as it was in Liu's case, a closer look at Hou's plan for his children suggests that his China- and family-oriented goals and values were the reasons why he worked hard all the time. That is, his obsession with making money was to serve his plan of sending his children back to China for better education that required more money to support their higher living costs and tuition fees.

Hou, as do many Chinese, attached a lot of value to his family that he always saved the best for his two children and wife. For example, he went through many obstacles to secure his legal status in Namibia by himself, but when he succeeded in his business, he took his family to Namibia to share his achievement. For the wellbeing of his family, Hou had no choice but to stay in Namibia where he was relatively more competitive in the market than back in China. If only he could make a living in China, he would not have emigrated to Namibia where he lived in a grimy Chinatown due to his unfamiliarity with the country.

¹²⁰ 程晋宽. "教育革命"的历史考察: 1966-1976. 福建教育出版社, 2001.

¹²¹ Driessen, Miriam. *Tales of Hope, Tastes of Bitterness: Chinese Road Builders in Ethiopia* (HKU Press, 2019).

Comparing Liu and Hou's case at this point, I note that even though they had different developmental trajectories during their stay in Africa, the narrative of *tasting bitterness* was shared by them due to their similar lower-class background. Through the lens of *tasting bitterness*, Liu kept working hard because he believed that his diligence could make him competitive in the face of potential threat from the newcomers. Hou, who was also a believer of *tasting bitterness*, worked hard to ensure the quality of his children's education in China. Both of them overlooked the importance of other factors in their goals and solely rendered the success or failure to their hard work.

Case Summary 3

What I find similar between Liu and Hou's cases is their shared identity as lower-class Chinese and as the victims of the larger structural problems in China. More specifically, both of them came to Africa to avoid the social pressure and cutthroat competition. In addition, they came to Africa with a belief that they can succeed as long as they work hard. While the narrative of *tasting bitterness* did, to some extent, help Hou endure the hardships he encountered upon his arrival in Namibia, it does not provide a full narrative of his success insofar as external circumstances are more important than one's hard work to the immigration experience. Having said that, in a similar manner to Liu, Hou was faithful to the ideal of *tasting bitterness*, in that he believed that he could provide a good education for his children in China through his hard work.

What he overlooked in his understanding about education was that good education was not always related to high tuition, and the educational quality in China was very standard across the country (unless he was considering to send his kids to international schools where better English education is offered but overseas nationalities are required for entrance). In other words, making more money to pay higher tuitions in some schools in China does not translate as providing a better education for his children. Nonetheless, the tuition concern became the reason why he still worked hard after he succeeded in his business in Namibia.

Hao Shengli: A Middle-Class Immigrant in Mozambique

This case aims to further elucidate the microhistory of the Chinese diaspora community in Africa. However, as I demonstrate below, *tasting bitterness* as a lower class narrative does not always provide a framework for understanding the Chinese diaspora community in Africa. I argue that the narrative became less important to the middle-class Chinese in terms of the hope it offers during the hardships, and it was sometimes understood differently by the individuals due to individual differences.

Unlike Hou and Liu, who were lower class and migrated to Africa to seek business opportunities and better life quality for themselves and their families, Hao Shengli, a leader of a brigade of Red Guards in Henan during the Cultural Revolution, benefitted from the change of the economic reform in the early years and achieved middle-class status before he migrated to Mozambique.¹²² But like Liu and Hou, he was also a firm supporter of *tasting bitterness*. When Howard French commented on his way of raising his older son, which is reminiscent of the way youth were treated during the cultural revolution,¹²³ Hao responded that:

I have to encourage him, have him fool around a bit, catch some fish, shoot a gun, hunt some birds. Boom, boom! That way he'll be happy. He already shoots well... That's how I was raised. I was sent down and it changed me for the better. Young people in China today no longer learn how to taste bitterness (*chi ku*). I want my son to become a real man, a worthy person.¹²⁴

Note how he viewed *tasting bitterness* differently than Liu and Hou, who believed their hard work would lead to the results they wanted. From Hao's perspective, *tasting bitterness* is gathering life experience in rurality and becoming tough, so when hardships come in the future, one will be able to

¹²² French, Howard W. *China's Second Continent* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, Kindle Edition, 2014). P29

¹²³ During the Cultural Revolution, the youth were sent down by the government to work alongside peasants in rural areas.

¹²⁴ French, Howard W. *China's Second Continent* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, Kindle Edition, 2014). P22

endure the hardships. The problem with his approach to *tasting bitterness* is that he did not clearly state what he wanted to achieve by becoming tough and experienced with rurality. In other words, if we imagine *tasting bitterness* as a balance scale, Hao put the price and cost—which were the experience with rurality and toughness—down on one side of the scale. The other side of the scale was empty or lacked a tangible, specific goal. If becoming a worthy person and a real man was what he wanted his son to achieve through *tasting bitterness*, this goal, compared to those in Hou’s and Liu’s cases, was too abstract to be seen as a hope.

To understand why Hao’s narrative of *tasting bitterness* was so different than others, I take a closer look at his approach to *tasting bitterness* and notice that it was eerily similar to the state media’s comment on the Chinese engineers who helped construct TAZARA during the socialist era and their ability to taste bitterness. Below is an interception from *Liberation Army Daily (Jiefangjun Bao)*:

The Tanzanian, Zambian and Chinese workers and engineers of the railway project worked closely together and supported each other to shoulder the struggle. They endured the blazing sun, fought against wind and rains, lived in straw sheds, slept on the ground and used whatever methods to cope with life on the site. They constantly improved their construction plans. They fought a battle against the weather and the earth, fearless of hardships, fearless of fatigue, fearless of adversity, fearless of danger... They slept next to their machinery and made every second count, struggling day and night to guarantee that the project would be a victory.¹²⁵

Given Hao’s political status as a leader of a small group of Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution, it is no surprise that he was influenced by the state media which often depicted *tasting bitterness* as a necessary struggle that one has to go through to prove, if not to achieve, one’s virtuous character. Note in this interception, the TAZARA project is portrayed as a battle against a vaguely defined enemy, which is constructed by natural elements, such as the sun, the wind, and the rain. The engineers who endure those natural elements are portrayed by the author as soldiers defeating their enemies to achieve victory. In a similar manner, Hao viewed *tasting bitterness* as a struggle against nature

¹²⁵ Driessen, Miriam. *Tales of Hope, Tastes of Bitterness: Chinese Road Builders in Ethiopia* (HKU Press, 2019). P168

that his son had to go through to prove, if not to become, to be a worthy person. The problem with this narrative is that it ignores the change of time background that the younger generations today no longer live in a socialist era in which the Chinese state needed the human capital to be able to endure natural hardships so it could speed up its socialist construction in rural and remote areas.

Given his different narrative of *tasting bitterness*, when I examine his endurance of hardships upon his arrival to Dubai and Mozambique, I note that he endured the hardships not because he believed in the hope offered by *tasting bitterness* as Liu and Hou did. Instead, as I demonstrate below, I ascribe the main factor that supported him to endure the hardships to his audacious personal characteristics constructed by his experience during the Cultural Revolution. For his success in seizing a large piece of land from the Inhambane government (a provincial government in Mozambique), I argue that his luck and local circumstances were the main contributors to the success.

Delving into Hao's business, even though he benefitted from the changes of economic reform in the early years, he was unable to keep his business thriving in China due to his lack of formal education and professional training required for a fast-growing market in China. His financial situation was exacerbated during the financial crisis from 2007 to 2008, which hit China and forced him to consider the alternative markets overseas where he can make a living and preserve his middle-class status. That was when successful stories about how people became rich in Dubai attracted investors like Hao and made his first overseas business adventure.¹²⁶

While Hao didn't disclose any details about it, what we do know from his business in Dubai was that his first attempt to do business overseas was a failure. However, the failure in Dubai was a turning point in his failing business that eventually set his trip to Mozambique, a former Portuguese colony where there were less Chinese migrants than English-speaking countries in Africa (various estimates 1,500 –

¹²⁶ French, Howard W. *China's Second Continent* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, Kindle Edition, 2014). P17

12,000 Chinese in Mozambique).¹²⁷ In his simple language, Hao explained why Mozambique was a good choice compared to other African countries:

Mozambique is a Portuguese-speaking country, though. This might bring me luck. I'll be damned if I understood Portuguese, but damnit, I figured, neither do most Chinese people in general, so what the fuck? There must be great undiscovered opportunities there, and I won't have to be constantly looking over my shoulder for other Chinese people coming to compete with me, cheat me out of my money, or steal my ideas.¹²⁸

The language barrier indeed discouraged some Chinese from coming to Mozambique, but there were migrants like Hao who spoke neither English nor Portuguese coming to the country as they considered a country with less Chinese must offer an opportunity for them to make money. In addition, what encouraged him to migrate to Mozambique was an encounter with a group of Chinese agriculturists in Dubai who had previously gone on aid missions to Africa, who told him "go to Africa, where you can acquire good land cheaply."¹²⁹

Though Mozambique is not the only Portuguese-speaking country in Africa, Hao's limited geographical knowledge about Africa and the rest of the world outside China limited his migration choice. Indeed, as observed from his interview, Hao heavily depended on the information from his network, which was very selective and regionally biased. He didn't verify whether the information he obtained was accurate or not. Neither did he consider the risks of losing his investment in Mozambique and potential problems with land and investment. He just went to Mozambique with an expectation that there would be fewer Chinese competitors fighting for the fertile land. At that point, he was audacious but not rational about his decision of migration.

With this high expectation about Mozambique, Hao first arrived in Maputo, the capital of Mozambique, but he soon encountered the bleak reality in Mozambique in contrast to his imagined virgin

¹²⁷ Horta, Loro (2007-08-13), "China, Mozambique: old friends, new business", International Relations and Security Network Update, retrieved 2007-11-03

¹²⁸ French, Howard W. *China's Second Continent* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, Kindle Edition, 2014). P30

¹²⁹ Ibid. P17

land. To my surprise, his earlier experience in the Cultural Revolution and the economic reform only taught him to be daring but not rational, a very stereotypical characteristic of the lost generations. As he naively considered all Chinese to be his friends in Mozambique, he was scammed by his own countrymen who borrowed his money and disappeared. Disappointed, Hou moved to the countryside to seek other opportunities for land as he reached Inhambane province, a former center of the Arab slave trade. Coincidentally, when he arrived in Inhambane, the local government was in desperate need for road and bridge repair projects that provided Hao an opportunity. In hindsight, such an opportunity was largely dependent upon timing and the mutual need of the local government and Hao. In other words, although Hao did not know the local government's need for road repair in advance of his arrival in Inhambane, he got lucky when the Inhambane government was in such need and was willing to provide a large piece of land as an award for whoever undertook the repair work.

But Hao's sufferings in Mozambique did not stop there. After he acquired a large piece of land which covers 5,000 acres, problems with land rights emerged. The land originally belonged to the local farmers before the Portuguese took it over during the colonial period. After the Portuguese left, the land came to the current government and the farmers were unhappy about having no lands for themselves. This dissatisfaction transferred into animosity against the new owner, Hao, who took over the land from the government's hands as an outsider, just like the Portuguese colonizers.

The animosity towards foreigners was deep-rooted in Mozambique's colonial past and can still be seen today. Hou's son, Yang, recalled that when he first arrived in Mozambique, he discovered that the local girls feared him and thought that Chinese people ate humans.¹³⁰

Hao was obviously aware of how the local demonized him and his family, but he was not so worried about the problems in the long term. His composure came from his plan of developing a huge family clan in Mozambique after he acquired the 5,000 acres of fertile land. He explained:

Right now I am bringing my children here. My older son, my younger son, eventually my daughter. I'm taking them out of school in China and bringing them all

¹³⁰ Ibid. P36

here. Within the next ten or so years we need to raise enough money, and then if my son has a lot of offspring with local girls, my two sons, in fact, if they've had lots of children, well what do the children become? Are they Chinese or Mozambicans?

The mothers are Mozambicans, but the land will be within our family. This means that because the children will be Mozambicans they can't treat us as foreigners. If need be we can even put the property in their name, protectively, but it will remain ours. It will be in my clan.¹³¹

At first glance, his plan might seem perfect since interracial marriage can not only eliminate local bias and animosity towards foreigners in the long run but can also secure the ownership of the land in Mozambique. Indeed, the government can no longer reclaim the land when the property is under Mozambican citizens' names. However, a closer reading of his plan suggests that he overestimated local women's willingness in marrying his sons and the practicability of his audacious plan in the long term. For one thing, the females who had the potential to become his daughters-in-laws held negative views against him and his sons, as observed from the interview. The antipathy of local women means that it was less likely that he would have grandchildren who can help him secure his land. For another, Hao's plan only works after decades as it takes time for his clan to be built up and by the time even if he did have such a huge clan as he thought, the government's policies for land rights might have become more against land grabbing and would be able to take over his decades of efforts on the land easily.

While his plan was likely to fail in the future, Hao was content with his status quo and seemed to be almost relieved from hardships that he told Howard French that, "soon, I will be bringing in some Chinese farmers and agricultural experts. I'll have them help me run things."¹³² With his plan for the land and his family and with the help of experts, he finally seemed to stand on a solid ground and have time to enjoy his life a little bit. However, I suspect that his good times would not last for a long time as the government still had rights to reclaim the land whenever it wanted to since his plan for land tenure was not well-thought out and was likely to fail in the long run. What would Hao do if he failed in securing land ownership and was forced to return it to the government? One possible prospect is that he would be

¹³¹ Ibid. P21

¹³² Ibid. P24

forced to migrate again just as how he was forced to leave China and Dubai, and he would have to go through a series of hardships in a new country in order to find new opportunities to maintain his middle-class status. At that point, he would be no different than Hou and Liu who pinned their hope for survival and better lives on their ability to endure hardships.

It is interesting to see how Hao thought things in such a simple way and how his rhetoric of interracial marriage was similar to the Portuguese colonization during the colonial time. However, his plan for seizing a piece of land was independent of the state's geopolitical strategies and was made without too much consideration and preplanning. Moreover, unlike those colonizers who exported commodities from the colonies to their home country, Hao did not export his crops back to China. His plan for the land was turning it into commercial farming which provided crops such as stevia and sugar for transnational companies such as Coca Cola and Pepsi. That is, however, not to say that Hao was innocent of exploitation. In fact, exploitation and verbal abuse of local workers were more serious in Hao's farm than the case in SOEs and their subcontractors. For example, he paid each of his worker \$1 for nine hours work (almost half of the minimum wage in Mozambique agricultural sector) and would sometimes dock their salaries if he was unsatisfied with their work.¹³³ The SOEs and their subcontractors, on the other hand, at least offered minimum wage for their local employees and included other benefits such as dining and housing.

When comparing Hao to Liu and Hou who were in a harmonious relationship with their local employees, Hao was indeed an exploiter. But when we put his case within the context of other countries' farmers in commercial farming, specifically the farmers from the U.S. and U.K, his exploitive practice was by no means unique and was not relevant to his Chinese identity. In this light, saying Hao was creating a colony in Mozambique distracts the attention from what would otherwise be a good argument about his capitalist and exploitive actions on local employees, which are typical in commercial farming regardless of farm owners' nationalities. In addition to the exploitive nature of commercial farming, what

¹³³ Ibid. P38

exacerbated the exploitation of workers in commercial farming in Mozambique was its labor laws, which were not as protective for laborers as they were in Ethiopia. In sum, the laws disadvantaged laborers' rights by banning the formation of unions, and they prohibited laborers from striking unless "complex conciliation, mediation, and arbitration procedures were exhausted, which typically took two to three weeks."¹³⁴ This explains why Hao was free from lawsuits for his abusive labor practice, while RCE and its subcontractors were entangled in lawsuits for the similar practices.

Case Summary 4

Hao's case is a unique one among all the cases in this chapter as it not only provides a different narrative of *tasting bitterness*, but it also presents Chinese large-scale commercial farming in Africa, a different method than most Chinese farmers' mixed farming. This type of farming is the reason why the criticism about the Chinese presence in African land as grabbing and empire building exists in the first place as the farming method seems similar to the imperial and colonial expansion.¹³⁵ But to be clear, Hao's migration intention and his large-scale commercial farming were not related to the Chinese government. On top of that, although exploitation of workers existed in Hao's farm, it was very common in commercial farming regardless of the farmers' nationalities.

Alternatively, I suggest that we should view Hao's exploitation of laborers as the miniature of the larger structural problems such as the exploitative nature of commercial farming and Mozambique's inadequate labor laws. In fact, these structural problems did not only exist in Mozambique, as discussed earlier in Chapter One. In a similar manner to Mozambique, the local government in China also conducted exploitive practices against laborers. That is why, in this chapter, I choose to focus on the

¹³⁴ U.S. Embassy Maputo, and Freedom of Press. "2015 Human Rights Report (Mozambique)." *U.S. Embassy in Mozambique*, 3 May 2017, mz.usembassy.gov/2015-human-rights-report-mozambique/.

¹³⁵ Bräutigam, Deborah. "U.S. Politicians Get China in Africa All Wrong." *The Washington Post*, 12 Apr. 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldpost/wp/2018/04/12/china-africa/>.

microhistory of “small characters” like Hao, Liu, Hou, and Tao as the function of most states is similar (with an exception of the Ethiopian government discussed in Chapter One).

As a “small character,” Hao was both a victim and a victimizer of capitalism. He was a victim because he was forced to leave China by his failing business resulted from excessive competition. But moving his business overseas was not successful as he suffered from failures in Dubai and endured many hardships upon his arrival in Mozambique. As a victimizer, after he received a large piece of land from the local government of Inhambane, his exploitation of the locals is similar to Western commercial farmers in Mozambique that prioritized profit at the cost of workers’ rights.

In his interview with Hao, French considered Hao’s case as an epitome of many other Chinese farmers in Africa. For this point view, I would argue that Hao a Henan native in China, was an exception in the Chinese diaspora community because of his early experience in the Cultural Revolution as a leader of a group of Red Guard, as well as his business success, more by accident than design, in the early stage of the reform era. The experiences in his early days constructed his audacious character which eventually brought him to Dubai and Mozambique when his business was failing in China. In addition, his extreme opinions about education were really rare in the Chinese community even to this day, and I only find similar attitudes in the Fujianese people’s regional culture.¹³⁶ For example, he considered languages and basic knowledge about business are more important than STEM subjects. But most of the Chinese diaspora in Africa, as observed from Hou and Liu’s case, maintain values that are still China-oriented, in that they consider formal education as the way out for their kids. Furthermore, Liu and Hou valued Chinese traditions even when they were in a foreign country, whereas Hao did not celebrate the Lunar New Year or value the idea of family in the same way as other Chinese did.¹³⁷

Despite the uniqueness of Hao compared to the rest of the cases in this chapter, his experience in Africa was also constructed by hardships. Although he might seem to be free from hardships in the long

¹³⁶ French, Howard W. *China's Second Continent* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, Kindle Edition, 2014). P21

¹³⁷ Ibid. P39

run and seem to be able to finally start enjoying his life after he received a large piece of land from the government, I argue that this is because he illusively thought his plan for land tenure and his family would work. In other words, his illusion provided him with a sense of safety, which gave him a choice to not to work as hard as he did. Once the reality falls short of his expectation, he will be in search for security again.

Conclusion

When the Sino-African relationship became more geo-economically oriented, criticisms about the Chinese presence in Africa arose. Most of these criticisms targeted Chinese activities in the agricultural and construction sectors for the purposes of land-grabbing and empire-building. In this light, Miriam Driessen's description, *tasting bitterness*, provides an alternative viewpoint to examine the Chinese presence in Africa. That is, the lower-class Chinese workers, similar to their African counterparts and other workers in the global south, were often the victims of the larger structural problems, such as exploitation of workers from the government and the companies.

As the four case studies in Chapter Two show, individual migrants' experiences in Africa were also constructed by hardships, despite the characters' differences. Two frameworks, Lin's *small pond migration theory* and Driessen's *tasting bitterness* help examine individual narratives and understand the Chinese presence in Africa as a whole. Lin's framework is creative in explaining Chinese migration intentions from a non-economic perspective, but it fails to account for why there were famers like Liu and Hou who persevered during the hard times and were committed to working hard if they valued the non-economic benefits of living in Africa as much as Tao did. In this light, Driessen's framework, *tasting bitterness*, complements Lin's shortcoming and provides us with a lens to peer into the mindset of the migrants. In short, seeing *tasting bitterness* as the only way to achieve their end goals, those migrants kept up working hard to avoid elimination from the market and to stay competitive in the face of newcomers.

The last case study, Hao, brings us back to the problems embedded within global capitalism, which are the exploitation of workers and the global south's disadvantageous position within the global capitalist supply chain. In sum, based on the experiences of the lower-class migrant workers, the Chinese companies in Ethiopia in Chapter One, and the individual cases in Chapter Two, I conclude that the

microhistory of the Chinese diasporas in Africa provides us with a new narrative of today's Sino-African relationship that Chinese are both the victims and the victimizers of the fast-changing circumstances.

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