



Tales of Hope, Tastes of Bitterness by Miriam Driessen (Hong Kong University Press 2019).



Tales of Hope, Tastes of Bitterness

A Conversation with Miriam Driessen

Nicholas LOUBERE

How is China's success in Africa experienced by those who work on the Chinese-run construction sites that have emerged across the continent? In *Tales of Hope, Tastes of Bitterness* (Hong Kong University Press 2019), Miriam Driessen follows the lives of Chinese road builders in Ethiopia to reveal the friction of Chinese-led development on the ground. Workers' hopes of transforming Africa and Africans and their expectations of gratitude remain unmet, as Ethiopian labourers and state entities challenge their work, expertise, and goodwill. Unravelling the intricate dimensions of *Ethiopian*-Chinese encounters, this book shows how power structures are contested and reshaped on and along the building site.

Nicholas Loubere: While most of the media and popular discourse focuses on 'China in Africa'—with an emphasis on China as the actor—this book flips the script and examines *Ethiopian*-Chinese encounters, with a more granular emphasis on the agency of local people. What does it mean to look at China and Africa from this perspective?

Miriam Driessen: In *Tales of Hope, Tastes of Bitterness* I cast light on Chinese-led development in Ethiopia from below to reveal its contested nature. I address the discrepancy between

the frequently noble, and at times lofty, aspirations of Chinese road builders and the much less rosy realities they face on the ground. For these Chinese migrants, the attitudes of Ethiopians bear little resemblance to what they initially envisaged, leaving them resentful of the apparent ingratitude of the locals, their lack of cooperation, and worse, their attempts to sabotage the construction work.

Drawing inspiration from Adams Bodomo's work, I refer to *Ethiopian-Chinese* encounters to emphasise that Ethiopian actors, from politicians and bureaucrats to rank-and-file workers and residents who live along the construction sites, often set the terms of the encounter as well as its outcomes. I should say, however, that the book does not entirely flip the script. It still takes the Chinese perspective as its focus. Apart from foregrounding the agency of Africans—as a number of Africanist scholars have convincingly done in recent years—it highlights the perceived lack of agency on the Chinese side. The powerlessness, acutely felt by Chinese men and women who shoulder the task to carry out infrastructure projects across Ethiopia and other parts of Africa, was a dominant theme; one that I believe is revealing of the power dynamics underpinning the encounter.

The value of studying *Ethiopian-Chinese* encounters lies in the recognition of the relationship as a mutual one. Certainly, Chinese involvement in Ethiopia has introduced power asymmetries; however, structures of domination and subordination, I show in my book, are challenged and reshaped on the ground.

NL: Chinese companies in Africa are often depicted as powerful exploiters of African labour. However, you depict an Ethiopian workforce that has its own ways of asserting itself. How effective were their methods and how were they perceived by the Chinese?

MD: For my research I spent days on end observing earth, masonry, and asphalt works. I accompanied staff on the road in dump trucks, rickety pickups, and fancy four-wheel drives, and resided in Chinese and Ethiopian workers' camps, sharing meals, conversations, and experiences. What struck me during my observation of daily construction activities, were indeed the powerful and creative ways in which Ethiopian rank-and-file workers asserted themselves. Their gumption in challenging managerial authority stands in sharp relief to the common image of the exploited African worker.

To be sure, power or agency—the capacity to exert power—is hard to measure. This is no less true for the power dynamics embedded in the relationship between Chinese managers and the Ethiopian labourers under their direction. Certainly, it is

easy to romanticise resistance. What we tend to forget, however, is that Chinese management and Ethiopian workers are utterly dependent on one another. Although Chinese employers control the means of production, they are unfamiliar with cultural practices and disconnected from local networks of power. They rely heavily on the cooperation of the Ethiopians for access to labour, resources, and political goodwill. The Chinese are and remain outsiders. This increases their vulnerability.

On the construction site, Ethiopian workers assert themselves through a broad range of methods, from subtle transgressions such as slowing down the work pace, leaving the work site without permission, casual chatting, and drinking beer during work time, to open modes of subversion, including filing lawsuits against their employers and staging labour strikes. Resistance—or subversion, as I prefer to call it in this context—was assertive and daring, often flying in the face of Chinese managers.

Workers typically challenged expatriate management from *within*. They used the same tools and methods that management deployed to discipline the workforce. While Chinese foremen, for instance, pushed casualisation to extremes, by replacing workers after even the slightest confrontation, labourers appropriated this tactic by voting with their feet and leaving themselves. Often workers would leave one Chinese company for another, thereby playing Chinese employers against each other.

In the book I discuss not only the manifestations of agency, but also the mechanisms that work to increase this agency, such as the Ethiopian legal system. The *wereda* courts—the lowest-level state courts in Ethiopia—assume a critical role in mediating labour-management relations, providing both a forum where labourers can voice their grievances and an avenue through which they can enhance their leverage against expatriate management. Indeed, in the courtroom workers prove most successful in fighting their Chinese employers.

The response of Chinese managers to these subversive efforts was mixed. They often acquiesced, attempting to reach a compromise. As workers grew bolder and alliances among various actors stronger, Chinese managers were compelled to give way over contractual arrangements and wage levels. The honour derived from ‘helping Africans develop’—the narrative used by many Chinese employers to describe their own activities in Ethiopia—thus had a distinctly bitter taste.

NL: In this book, you highlight the importance of using patterns of Chinese domestic development as a lens through which to better understand how Chinese companies and migrants operate in foreign contexts, such as the ones you examined in Ethiopia. What can we learn from domestic China that is useful for China overseas? And why is this so often ignored?

MD: *Tales of Hope, Tastes of Bitterness* attempts to understand Chinese road-building activities in Ethiopia in part by looking at what is happening in China. Chinese approaches to, and views on, development in Ethiopia are informed and inspired by domestic development. This holds true for the ideological assumptions that drive development in China as well as the structural dimensions that underpin it.

Decades of rapid economic growth in China have produced a vested belief in the power of markets and the submission of the self to production as a precondition for wealth generation. Self-development has been the norm, if not duty, of all citizens. Chinese typically credit the present state of their country to the blood, toil, sweat, and tears of individuals motivated to improve their lives and society as a whole. The road builders transported these ideas to Ethiopia and projected them onto Ethiopian labourers.

Expectations of development were also informed by the socio-political structures that underlie development in China, including the nature of state-society relations and the coalitions between local governments and industries that have long driven domestic growth. In order to boost the local economy, county and city governments have been active participants in attracting investment from outside, and have attempted to retain industries by creating a favourable business environment. This explains, for instance, the frustration of Chinese road builders with local governments in northern Ethiopia, which in their eyes fail to protect their interests as foreign investors, or worse, even take them to court.

In Ethiopia, Chinese involvement cuts across sharp central-local divisions. Whereas the Ethiopian federal state is generally supportive of Chinese activities, local governments are inclined to defend the interests of members of the local community, including Ethiopian labourers employed by Chinese firms. I describe these dynamics in chapters 5 and 6 of the book.

Why has the link between domestic and overseas development been overlooked? One of the main reasons, I believe, has been the emphasis on the pull factors of Chinese involvement in, and migration to, Africa. ‘What is there to get in Africa for China?’ is a question that has long occupied the (Western) media. Certainly, this discourse has shifted somewhat after the introduction of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), when observers started to draw a link between Chinese outward investment and

socioeconomic transformations in mainland China, identifying a spill-over effect. However, this spill-over—in terms of not only commodities, but also human resources—did not start with the BRI. It has been going on for much longer. In fact, the BRI has changed little with regard to Chinese engagement with Ethiopia, apart from the discourse that boosts the confidence of Chinese developers and instils them with a sense of purpose.

NL: You talk about the significance that migration and the act of ‘being on the move’ has for Chinese migrant workers in Ethiopia. Can you elaborate on what the act of migration meant for the identities and self-perceptions of your Chinese interlocutors? Does this tell us anything more generally about the significance of the unprecedented movement of Chinese people over the past four decades?

MD: Development drives rather than curbs migration. China provides a primary example. Since the country’s opening up, economic growth has fuelled unprecedented mobility, initially from the countryside to the cities. Rural-urban migration and overseas migration to countries in Asia, Africa, and South America are in fact intimately linked. I argue that there has been a shift of the migration frontier from rural-urban migration to overseas migration. I hasten to add, however, that I am talking about a particular group of men and women who self-identify—often somewhat sarcastically—as ‘peasant workers’.

Chinese mobility to Africa reflects socioeconomic shifts in China. There is, for instance, a growing number of middle-class Chinese youths who are attracted to Africa for similar reasons as their Western counterparts are: curiosity, life experience, and adventure. This group is different from the one I discuss in my book. The men I worked with had either been rural-urban migrants in China or were the children of this generation and the first ones in their families to enjoy higher education. Their main reason for moving to Ethiopia was—as many frankly admitted—a higher salary. Overseas migration enabled them to craft a more secure and comfortable life in China. Migration was an important avenue for social upward mobility.

The bitter reality is, however, that migrant men can only sustain their newly gained middle-class lifestyle by staying abroad. Many of them have been unable to taste the fruits of their overseas employment. Facing limited employment opportunities in a dwindling construction sector at home, they cannot go back. Only those with connections are able to return, and even then, their employment is hardly satisfying, as some returnees confided. Reluctant to compromise on a lower salary or enter a period of unemployment, many feel they do not have a choice but to stay in Ethiopia.

Again, the book tells the story of a particular generation of predominantly men. Born and bred in rural China, this generation finds itself in a state of suspension, stuck as they are between China and Africa, between a poor rural background and an insecure urban future, and between enduring hardships and enjoying comforts. This generation is the child of China's rapid economic growth and the radical social transformations it has spawned in its wake. ■