



Victims of Chinese neo-colonialism or beneficiaries in a win-win-relationship?

An ethnographic research on African
agency in Ethio-China relations



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Abstract

The Chinese presence in Ethiopia has been growing considerably in recent years. Mostly young, resourceful Ethiopians have found ways to profit from it in various ways. Based on a six-week field trip in Ethiopia, the author argues that cultural brokers and merchants, who directly interact with Chinese business migrants, actively profit from the Chinese presence in their country. On the one hand, cultural brokers execute agency within Ethio-China relations through translation, facilitation and mediation and by creating intercultural meaning and understanding. Merchants on the “China Market” in Addis Ababa on the other hand ameliorate their incomes by adapting to Chinese demands and interacting with traders in China. Both groups embark on journeys to China themselves for business or educational reasons. However, a deep *inequality of opportunities and limited agency* was observed. Workers and daily labourers are regularly victims of exploitation. Chinese employers actively profit from low labour costs, the absence of a minimum wage and weak enforcement of labour rights by the Ethiopian government. Strict hierarchies and exploitative work regimes in Chinese factories, as well as a challenging socio-economic environment, leave very little room for purposeful actions, inventiveness and creativity. Capabilities to act out agency in the interaction with Chinese migrants are unevenly distributed and depend on education, language skills, financial and social resources. Dominant narratives about China's activities in Africa have proven to be misleading to describe the situation in Ethiopia. China is neither “neo-colonising” Ethiopians, nor is the Chinese presence “mutually beneficial” for all actors involved. Considering the inequality of opportunities and limited agency at play in Ethio-China relations, the question about who exactly benefits most from these relations is crucial, but often neglected in dominant narratives.

All photographs presented in this thesis were taken during a six-week field trip in Ethiopia in January and February 2019 and all copyrights belong to the author. The images presented are not intended to illustrate or decorate the theory and empirical research in this report, but to add another (visual) layer to the thesis, allowing a thick description (Geertz 1960) of the research topic. The photographs in the following are presented in three thematic photo galleries: Infrastructures and the manifestation of Ethio-China relations; labour force and industrial parks; collaborate and compete on Addis Ababa’s China Market. Captions were intentionally left out, as the images should speak for themselves and are not meant to describe specific incidents, but rather to visually narrate dynamics and changes currently taking place in Ethiopia.

1. Introduction

I admit that it is a good thing to place different civilizations in contact with each other; that is an excellent thing to blend different worlds; that whatever its own particular genius may be, a civilisation that withdraws into itself atrophies; that for civilizations, exchange is oxygen; that the great good fortune of Europe is to have been a crossroads, and that because it was the locus of all ideas, the receptacle of all philosophies, the meeting place of all sentiments, it was the best center for the redistribution of energy. But then I ask the following question: has colonization really placed civilizations in contact? Or, if you prefer, of all the ways of establishing contact, was it the best? I answer no. And I say that between colonization and civilization there is an infinite distance.

(Aimé Césaire, Discourse on Colonialism 1955 [2000: 33-34])

1.1. How the subject found me: Reflections on my research topic

Addis Ababa, 8.09.2011, early morning: It's foggy, rainy, cold and not really what I had expected from my first visit in a Sub-Saharan African country. Ethiopia was my choice because of its fascinating history and its ecological diversity, ranging from lush forest on high mountain plateaus in the northwest to the brooding, hot Danakil Desert below sea level in the northeast. Historically, Ethiopia is an African outlier. It was never fully colonised, no matter how hard the Italians had tried. Then there was the figure of Haile Selassie, a king shrouded in legend. Finally, there was Lucy, the 3.2 million years old hominid, on display in the National Museum in Addis Ababa (or at least a copy of it) and the fact that Ethiopia is often referred to, rightfully or not, as the cradle of humanity.

Besides the harsh weather that welcomed me to Addis Ababa, there was another big surprise. During my first strolls through the city, whenever I saw signs of modernisation, they bore the mark of Asian influence. The astonishment shall further deepen during my voyage all over Ethiopia: Be it construction sites for new high-rise buildings in Addis Ababa, for new streets around Gonder or for a new industrial park in Hawassa with residential camps for Chinese workers attached to it, Chinese influence was everywhere. It was here in Ethiopia, where I witnessed first-hand the deep geopolitical and economic transformations taking place due to China's¹ rise from an impoverished nation and long-time favourite for cheap production by western manufacturers to a global political and economic power.

¹ I am aware that the country's full name is People's Republic of China. To facilitate readability, I will use the term China to refer to the nation state throughout this thesis.

Since it began to reform its economy in 1978, China has lifted 850 million people out of poverty (World Bank n.d.). This newly empowered Asian country with a population of 1.3 billion people and a huge hunger for energy and natural resources started to invest heavily in the extraction of oil, copper and rare earths at the turn of the millennium and gave loans to most African states for assignments to Chinese companies to build infrastructures. Since the first ministerial conference in Beijing in 2000 and the following tri-annual Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), ties between China and African states were rapidly strengthening. Heads of state of African countries were now regularly invited for conferences and trainings to China, while Chinese presidents and their economic ministers were frequent guests in African states. A former African correspondent for Swiss Public Radio told me that the year 2000 was a game-changer for the African continent in regards of infrastructure development. He had observed one example after another where China has done more in a short time than European partners have done over decades. Others have argued that the whole narrative of an “emerging Africa”, which started to gain momentum from 2010 on, was partly based on the rapid development of commercial and financial ties between African states and China (Samba Sylla 2020).

The more I read and heard about emerging Africa-China relations², the more the missing of voices of the people concerned and the lack of consideration of African agency in narratives about Africa-China relations became evident. The experience and agency of most African citizens beyond heads of state, diplomats and business tycoons was rarely taken into account. I asked myself: How do African people, the old man in the barber shop, the young women selling vegetables on the market, the high school graduate searching for his first job, consider the Chinese presence in their country? How does the Chinese presence expand or shrink their “vistas of human possibility” (Guyer in Adebaniwi 2017: 2) and the capacity to live a good life? It is a capacity that can be enhanced and expanded or weakened and destroyed, especially in difficult socio-economic circumstances that characterise many African countries. In the cacophony of media reports, political statements and economic outlooks, it became clear to me that there was a lack of interest in “fundamental issues, processes, structures, agencies and dynamics that shape the political economy of everyday life in Africa” (Adebaniwi 2017: 4).

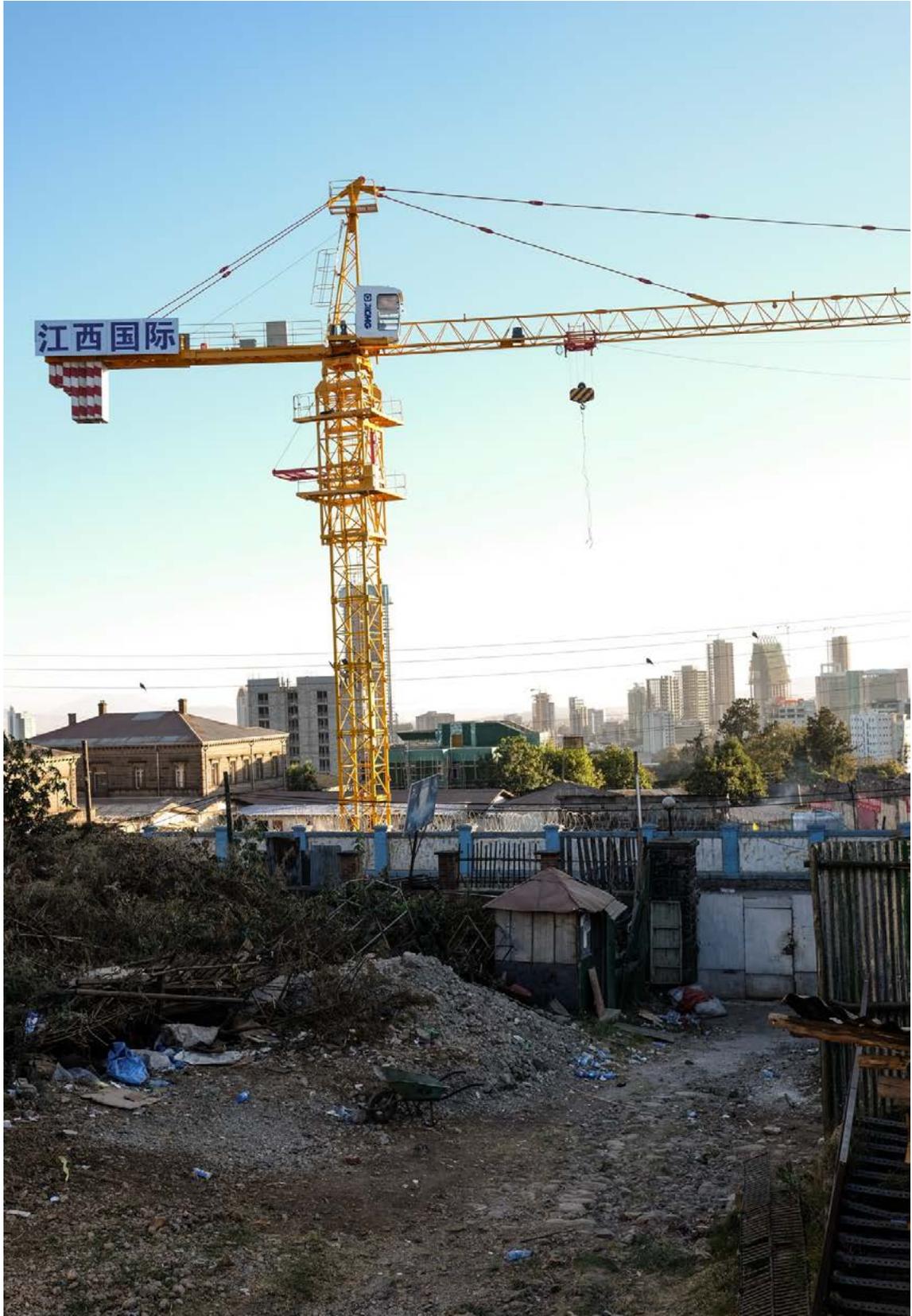
In 2019, there was an opportunity to go back to Ethiopia for a reporting assignment and to do field research for my MA studies in Changing Societies³. I saw a chance to nurse my curiosity and delve into the everyday practices of Africa-China relations in Ethiopia, the country that has profited more than almost any other country on the continent (except for Angola) from Chinese loans and investments (China Africa Research Initiative 2020). Using ethnographic methods, my goal was to take a serious look at Africans’ agency within Ethio-China relationships and to challenge predominant narratives describing these transcontinental relations. I hope that this thesis, as limited as its scope is, can contribute to the growing body of research that is aimed at explaining Africa-China relations from the perspective of people directly concerned, rather than from the perspective of those parties who are interested to frame them in a certain way, to serve their own political, economic or individual goals.

² I will use the term “Africa-China relations” throughout this report. In scientific literature the term “China-Africa relations” is well established. However, as the focus of my thesis is on African agency, I decided to emphasise Africa’s role in this relation by terminology. I am aware that the term itself is problematic, as it tries to sub summarize the relations of one country with a whole continent, consisting of 54 sovereign African states, which differ largely from each other by geography, size of population, economic growth and political systems. Needless to say that the relations between China and each of these states bear their own particular characteristics. Still, there are some common characteristics in the way China interacts with African states and people.

³ A study programme launched in 2018 at the University of Basel, involving a range of different social science disciplines, among them social anthropology.

Photo gallery

Infrastructures and the manifestation of Ethio-China relations

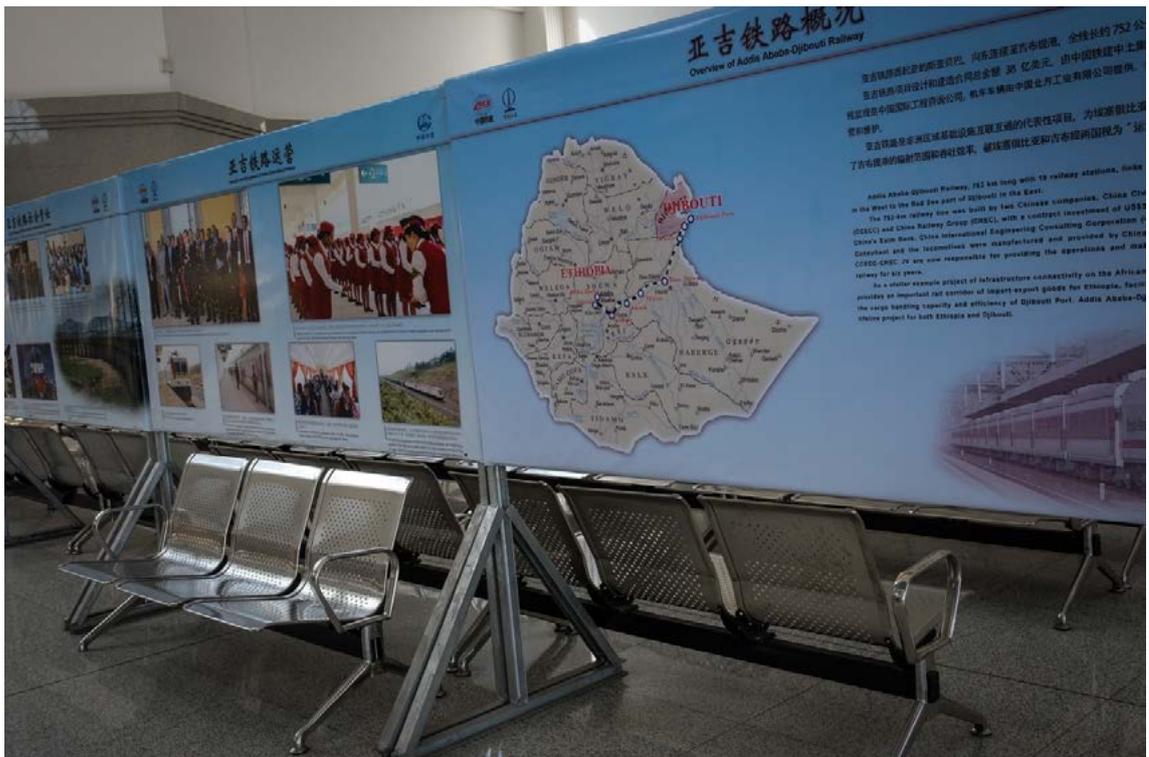


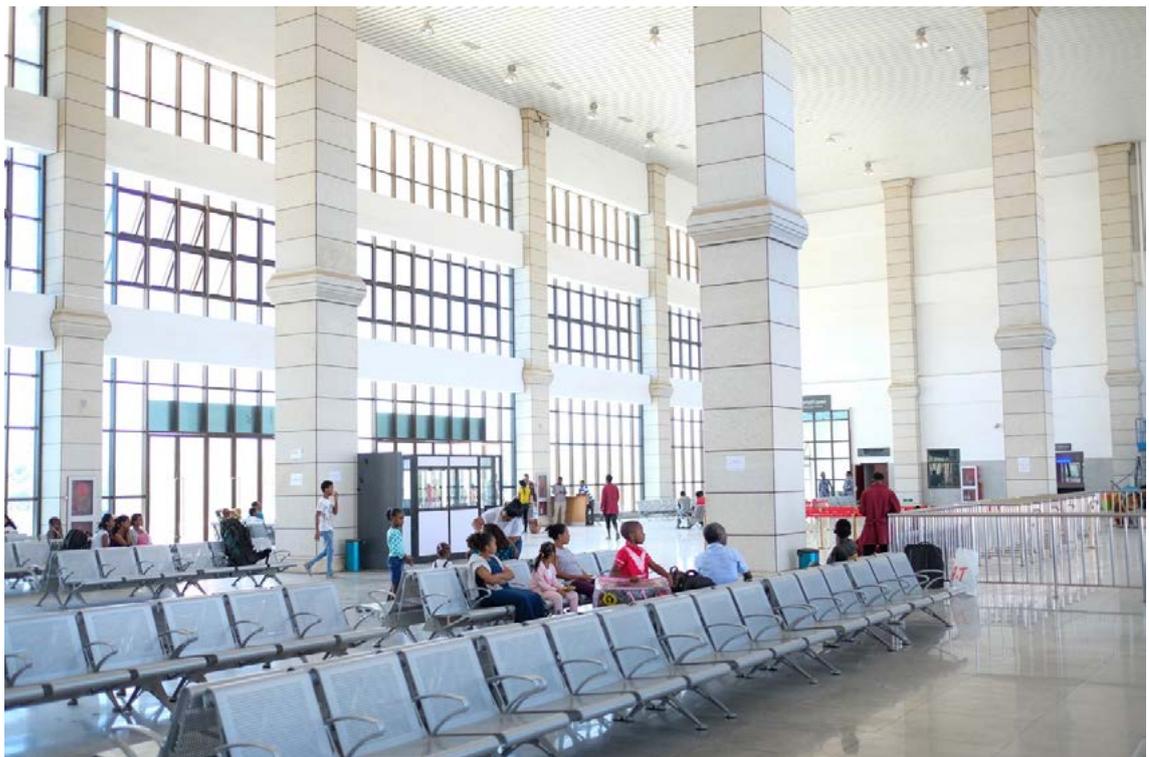












1.2. Research gaps and goals of this study

Thus far, scholarship about Africa-China relations has been largely dominated by the fields of macroeconomics, international relations and geopolitics (Rotberg 2008; Brautigam 2009; Cheru 2016; Alden 2007, 2017; Lahtinen 2018; Benabdallah 2019). These study fields provide insights into the political and economic implications of stronger cooperation between nations. They also shed light on official motivations for and the characteristics of Chinese investments in Africa. However, most of these studies focus on states and governments as actors rather than the people living in them. Giles Mohan et al. have recognised a tendency towards “methodological nationalism” (2014: 10) in the analysis of Africa-China relations. Nation-states are seen to be the natural containers for social processes, with a congruence of social, political and economic borders. Furthermore, these studies on Africa-China relations tend to be state centric and focus on bilateral elite relations and are characterised by the absence of the voices of the people concerned. Personal hopes, motivations and fears of actors directly involved in Africa-China intercultural relations are not in the centre of interest in these study fields. But as Chris Alden noted in a critical reflection on his own study field of international relations: “The behaviour of thousands of newly settled Chinese businessmen and the conduct of the African communities in which they live and work will matter as much as the diplomacy and concessions made at the government level” (2007: 128).

The disciplines of social anthropology and cultural studies have given way to an increasing body of literature that investigates the cultural implications of China's presence in Africa (Mohan et al. 2014; Mohan & Lampert 2013; Strauss 2013; Siu & McGovern 2017; Batchelor 2017; Driessen 2016, 2019). These researchers claim that China's engagement in Africa, while in the first place economically and politically motivated, comes with many cultural impacts, which go largely unnoticed by a broader public. The attempt to integrate political economy and international relations with more culturally sensitive accounts is therefore seen as an important contribution to the growing field of Africa-China studies among these researchers. They have called for more ethnographic field studies to better understand connections and contingencies of Africans and Chinese on the ground as well as to better understand socio-cultural dynamics of these relations.

A significant gap in the research on Africa-China relations are so far gender dynamics. Most social science studies and ethnographic research on the topic do not explicitly emphasise gender aspects. An exception is the research of Mohan et al. (2014) that explicitly addressed the topic as well as Lesley Nicole Braun's current research project (ongoing), concentrating on the lives and work of Congolese transnational commerce women traveling to China (University of Basel n.d.). I was not able to contribute to closing this gap with my own field research, as my interlocutors were mainly men (see chapter 3.4 on limitations).

As we will see in chapter 2.3, the interpretation of Africa-China relations has been heavily contested and the narratives seem to be often one-sided, simplifying, glorifying or demonising China's engagement in Africa. The narratives are dominated by the same political and economic actors and institutions that so far stood in the centre of scientific research about Africa-China relations, therefore bearing the same “methodological nationalism” (Mohan et al. 2014) bias as the discipline in general.

Mirjam de Bruijn et al. (2007) argued that more research should be focused on agency of individual actors to not forget the human being in fields like globalisation studies, in which Africa is often perceived as a victim of economic, political and cultural transformations on a global scale. They urge researchers to re-centre African people in research and policies. Agency and the call to “[...] reinserting African agency into China-Africa relations” (Mohan & Lampert 2013: 92) has become a defining character of much of the work done on a micro level focussed on the direct interactions between Africans and Chinese. Refocussing on agency has the potential to overcome victimising approaches for a more nuanced understanding of local, context-specific processes at work, without ignoring the structural limitations at play but neither

overemphasising them. Agency is a promising concept which I will use as a 'lens' throughout this thesis to guide my analysis of empirical data and my reflections on the narratives about Africa-China relations and their ignorance regarding the agency of the people involved in day-to-day interactions.

While most of Africa-China research in general and ethnographies in particular have focused on West Africa, with Zambia, Nigeria, Ghana and South Africa being the most scrutinised countries, less research has been published on the situation in East Africa and Ethiopia in particular. This is insofar remarkable, as Ethiopia has received the largest amount of Chinese loans of all African countries between 2000 and 2017, with the exception of Angola (China Africa Research Initiative 2020). The money provided by China has allowed Ethiopia to invest heavily in new infrastructures, such as dams for hydropower generation, cross boarder train lines, industrial parks, new roads and stadiums (Cheru 2016). Ethiopia's capital Addis Ababa, where the African Unions headquarters⁴ is located holds a special place within Africa-China relations. Moreover, Addis Ababa Bole Airport has developed into a continental hub for Africa-China journeys. Ethiopian Airlines now flies to Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Hong Kong and Chengdu with several flights per week. In 2019 a new terminal⁵ was opened, built and financed by China, which tripled the airport size and increased the capacity from 7 million passengers to 22 million passengers annually (Massey 2019). Because of massive infrastructure projects and new business opportunities in the country, the number of Chinese expatriates in Ethiopia has risen significantly in the past years: Estimates range from 20,000 to 40,000 people (Cook 2016), but figures about the Chinese community living in Africa are mostly inaccurate and dubious (for an outline of different estimates see Mohan et al. 2014: 4–5).

The narratives about Ethio-China⁶ relations are, similarly to the narratives about Africa-China relations, based on macro-economic data and political analysis (see for example Cheru 2016, Nicolas 2017, Mulugeta 2018). Alessandro Jedlowski and Michael W. Thomas argue that the study of Ethio-China relations is characterised by a lack of interest in how people share their lives on the ground. "Hence, there has been little interest in the sociological and cultural consequences of the increased connections and exchanges between these two countries" (2017: 66). I therefore argue that narratives about Ethio-China relations are largely premised on a lack of experience and knowledge regarding personal interactions between Ethiopians and Chinese and therefore may dismiss the agency of Ethiopians involved in these interactions. Social anthropology with its focus on actors, their motivations and embeddedness in certain cultural contexts, has a lot of potential to enrich the field of Africa-China relations in general and Ethio-China relations in particular. With ethnographic field research as its main strategy to gather qualitative data, the discipline is well positioned to deepen the knowledge about Ethio-China people's everyday entanglements through micro studies.

⁴ A new 20-storey building for the AU was opened in 2012 in central Addis Ababa. The 200 million US dollar investment for its construction was provided by the Chinese state and the construction works were done by "China State Construction Engineering". A Chinese official said that "[t]he panoramic view of the conference center is like two hands holding each other, signifying the strengthening friendship between China and Africa" (Lianxing 2011).

⁵ The project was funded by the Chinese government and built by "China Communications Construction Company" for 363 million USD. Right next to the Airport the same company has built the luxurious "Skylight Hotel", now the biggest hotel in Addis Ababa with the largest Chinese restaurant on the continent (Massey 2019).

⁶ I decided to use the term "Ethio-China" relations throughout this thesis. The term "Ethio" has been used to describe a particular kind of Ethiopian Jazz, with Mulatu Astatke as the "father of Ethio-Jazz". Scholars, mainly from Ethiopia, have since used the term "Ethio" to describe the countries relation to China (see for example Antegn 2019).

Only a few researchers from social sciences, including Ding Fei (2018), Seth Cook (2016) and Miriam Driessen (2016; 2019), have dealt with everyday and work relations between Chinese and Ethiopians. Driessen concentrated on reasons for Chinese emigration to Ethiopia (2016) and the interplay between corruption and humour in Ethiopian road projects (2019). The latest study provides deep insights into everyday interactions of Chinese managers and Ethiopian brokers and government officials, as well as into the agency exercised by Ethiopian actors in business deals. Her observations will inform the interpretation of my empirical data. Fei has provided insights into Chinese work regimes in Ethiopia and working conditions in Chinese led industrial parks in particular. She has chosen a quantitative approach and worked with surveys, but also gained close access to Chinese employers. I will later draw from her findings to complement my own experiences from talking to Ethiopian workers employed by Chinese companies. Cook has focused on the agri-food business in Ethiopia and conducted field research on the China Market in Addis Ababa. While he concentrated on the situation and motivations of Chinese shop owners on the market, I will concentrate on Ethiopian merchants and shop owners on the 'China Market' and will rely on his findings about the dynamics and hierarchies on the market where useful.

1.3. Research Question

My research question will guide me throughout this thesis and will be particularly important for analysing my empirical material in chapter 4. Moreover, I will link answers to that question to my broader interest in reflecting on conflicting narratives about Africa-China relations.

The main question I will follow throughout this research is:

- What are the various ways in which Ethiopians with different social and professional backgrounds exercise agency within Ethio-China relations?

Sub-questions related to the main question which helped me to orientate and focus my interest during field research are as follows:

- How do Ethiopians articulate that they profit from the Chinese presence in their country and if so in what ways they profit from it?
- How do Ethiopians identify and discuss negative consequences of the Chinese presence in Ethiopia?
- What motivations underlie Ethiopian people's interaction with Chinese migrants?
- To what extent do Ethiopian actors shape their individual Ethio-China relations according to their needs and personal goals?

1.4. Structure of the report

The structure of the paper is as follows: In chapter 2 (literature review), I will briefly present the most relevant findings on the contemporary political and economic characteristics of the Africa-China relations. I will then particularly focus on social science and micro studies within Africa-China research. This is followed by a closer look at Ethio-China relations, with a focus on history economic exchange, places of Ethio-Chinese interactions and representation of Ethio-China relations in media. I will then outline the dominant narratives about Africa-China relations and present research that scrutinises these narratives. This is followed by a review of different conceptualisations and theorisations of agency, with a particular focus on agency in Africa-China relations.

In chapter 3 (methods and field research), I will discuss the methods applied for this thesis within my field research in Ethiopia. I will present my sample, discuss ethical considerations

and show the limits of my research. In chapter 4 (searching for agency in Ethio-Chinese relations), I will present my empirical findings on personal Ethio-China relations of actors from different professional groups and analyse Ethiopians agency exercised within these interactions. I will do this mainly through narrations⁷ inspired from my field research. On the one hand, I will recount experiences from places I have visited in short “vignettes”. On the other hand, I will present Ethiopians with experience in working together and interacting with Chinese people in the form of “short portraits”. These narrations are informed by transcripts of unstructured and semi structured interviews (see annex). I concentrated on three different groups of people: cultural brokers, workers and merchants on the “China Market” in Addis Ababa. Vignettes and short portraits for every group are followed by preliminary conclusions, where I will reflect my findings in regards of existing literature and my research question.

In the final chapter (conclusions), I will draw more general conclusions about the agency of Ethiopians observed in Ethio-China relations and challenge the dominating narratives presented in chapter 2.3.

⁷ This strategy was inspired by Gordon Mathews et al. and his book “The world in Guangzhou” (2017). His narration about African migrants in Guangzhou is based on short portraits of African migrants and long interviews conducted with them. By placing the lives and words of his interlocutors in the centre of the book, he gives them importance and respects their agency within Africa-China relations. It is also one of many examples of how ethnography can not only be scientifically rich and valuable, but also compelling and inspiring to read. What is more, it shows that good anthropological research can reach a broader audience by not excessively relying on a specialised language.

2. Literature review

2.1. Africa-China relations: old and new entanglements

Many African states, including Ethiopia, have a long history⁸ of political relations with China dating back to the 1950s. Since the turn of the millennium however, the presence of Chinese companies in Africa, the volume of investments and loans and the number of Chinese migrants on the continent has increased sharply. Some have claimed that there are over one million Chinese migrants on the African continent (French 2015)⁹. According to a McKinsey study, over 10'000 Chinese companies are now active in Africa (Jayaram et al. 2017). Apart from large, state backed business conglomerates, most of them are small and medium-sized enterprises. The enforced engagement in Africa was partly a result of China's "going out" strategy since 1999, in which the government encouraged its population and Chinese companies to settle and invest abroad (Nicolas 2017). Furthermore, with China's booming manufacturing sector the demand for raw materials and energy rose sharply. In 2008 Angola supplied China with 15 percent of its oil imports, surpassing Saudi Arabia's oil flows to China (Rupp in Rotberg: 2008).

Bilateral trade has since grown rapidly, reaching a total worth of 199 billion USD in 2013 (Wang & Elliot 2014: 1014), surpassing the US-African trade volume. Between 2000 and 2018, Chinese financiers signed 1,077 loan commitments worth 148 billion USD with African governments and their state-owned enterprises (China Africa Research Initiative 2020). Most loans were given for transport infrastructure (47 billion), power infrastructure (37 billion) and mining ventures (18.6 billion). The peak of loan giving was reached in 2016 with 29.4 billion USD. From the beginning on these loans were characterised by China's policies of no strings attached and non-interference (Rupp in Rotberg: 2008), providing African states with alternatives to traditional lenders such as the IMF or the World Bank and their political conditions coupled to these loans.

A lot of Chinese investments were targeted towards the development of infrastructure, such as new roads, train lines, ports and airports. Stephanie Rupp has characterised this effort to rebuild African infrastructure as a centrally important contribution to the betterment of the lives of African communities. At the same time she argues that "[h]igh-profile construction projects, such as stadia to house national football teams, have proven effective in sweetening popular perceptions of both the Chinese economic presence in Africa and the African leadership that has midwived Chinese involvement in African economies" (in Rotberg 2008: 75).

The end of the millennium not only stands for more intense economical exchange between China and African states, but also for enforced ties on a political scale, with the "Forum on China-Africa Cooperation" (FOCAC) as the most visible outcome of the rapprochement. The FOCAC in 2000 in Beijing for some commentators symbolised not only a turning point in the Africa-China relations, but for Africa in general (Schlaefli 2019a). Since then, China has been ramping up its investments on the continent and has shown ever greater interest in the continent during its tri-annual Forum that since has taken place in Beijing and a range of African countries.

⁸ A detailed account of the history of Africa-China relations cannot be part of this thesis. For a good recount see David Hamilton Shinn & Joshua Eisenmann (2012) and Fantu Cheru (2016) for Ethiopia.

⁹ Estimates about Chinese migrants in Africa are unreliable. Most African countries do not share statistics about Chinese migrants and the same is true for China. Even if the official figures would be shared, this would not imply illegal migration and visa overstayers (Mohan et al. 2014).

The most recent FOCAC in Beijing in September 2018 was symbolic for China's actual geopolitical position in terms of its engagement in Africa. Heads of state from more than forty African states as well as thousands of businessmen, government officials and journalists had come to the event (The China Africa Project 2020). For the first time, a UN Secretary-General gave a keynote speech at the forum. Prime Minister Xi Jinping's announcement that China would invest 60 billion dollars in Africa in the coming years was welcomed by standing ovations from the African guests.

But the Chinese presence on the African continent is not purely economical, as one might think, but is characterised by elements of soft power¹⁰ too. In 2017, China ran 46 Confucius Institutes on the continent, where Africans can get in touch with Chinese language and culture (King in Batchelor 2017). More than 50'000 Africans are now studying in China, many with scholarships provided by the host governments (The Economist 2017) and Chinese medicine clinics have become a regular feature in many African cities. China runs one of the world's largest short-term training programmes and had planned to bring 30,000 Africans to China between 2013 and 2015 with an increase of full scholarships for Africans to study in China's universities by 18,000 in the same period (King 2013). China now regularly sponsors one to two weeks workshops for African government officials, journalists and military staff in China. Lina Benabdallah has found that "professional development programmes for African journalists are an opportunity for African trainees to be socialised in Chinese values, norms, and expert knowledge" (2019: 495). Such trainings contribute to building a positive image of China in Africa and Benabdallah argues that such investments in knowledge sharing are providing Beijing with a distinct competitive advantage in Africa over Western countries.

What's more, China has sent thousands of soldiers to participate in peacekeeping missions in Liberia and DR Congo (Wang & Elliot 2014) and in 2017 established its first military base in Djibouti. While China's contributions to the UN budget in 2010 amounted to 67 million dollars, by 2018 it was already 193 million (Wang & Elliot 2014) and China has been participating in the United Nations Development Programme since 2010 and now supports UN peace missions in ten countries, primarily in Africa. In 2015, Xi Jinping announced the expansion of Chinese contribution to the permanent UN peacekeeping force to 8000 people (The Economist 2015). At the end of September 2018, China provided 2506 (of a total of 89,986) blue helmets, climbing on the eleventh spot among the countries with the highest number of personnel (Godemont et al. 2018). Beijing has since used its veto power in the UN security council to provide defence and protection to leaders of African partners that were challenged by members from the West (Wang & Elliot 2014). And it is evident, that China currently skilfully fills the vacuum in the UN produced by the current US administration.

2.1.1. Research on Africa-China relations beyond methodological nationalism

As mentioned in chapter 1.2, interest in Africa-China relations for a long period mainly came from scholars of macroeconomics, international relations and political science. However, scholars from sociology, human geography and global studies (Park 2013, Mohan et al. 2014; Cook et al. 2016) as well as social anthropology and African studies (Rupp in Rotberg 2008, King 2013; Driessen 2016, 2019) have made important contributions to better understand China-Africa relations beyond a state-centred perspective. Kenneth King (2013; in Batchelor 2017) focused his research on language and culture and investigated the activities of Confucius Institutes all over Africa, and how their work influences how Chinese are perceived within African societies. Yoon Jung Park (2013) has contributed insights in othering processes and the perception of Chinese in South Africa. She shows how foreigners are politically constructed and

¹⁰ Soft Power understood as the use of a country's cultural and economic influence to persuade other countries to do something, rather than the use of military power (Cambridge Dictionary 2020).

how competition adds to tensions between residents and migrants. Her research further shows how personal interactions and memories can serve as mitigating factors, even in contexts of generally negative framing of the Chinese presence.

Miriam Driessen (2016) has done field research in Ethiopia to explore the dynamics of labour migration through migrant narratives that introduce new insights about the distinct characteristics of Chinese migration to Africa and on the relationship between emigration and social change. In contrast to the dominant narrative of successful entrepreneurs enlarging their benefits through engagement with Africa, Driessen shows that the reasons for emigration to Africa is often more strongly linked to the challenges and necessities of developments in China than to developments in Africa. Hairong et al. (2019) conducted surveys and interviews in order to understand why Chinese in Africa are often to be said to 'self-segregate'. They find factors that affect Chinese adaptation in African host societies which include local political environment, recentness of migration, language barriers and corporate policies to mitigate crime and conflict. However, they don't find evidence that Chinese are more self-isolated than other migration communities and uncover it as a long-standing Yellow Peril discourse about Chinese "self-segregation". According to the authors, different Chinese entities engage local economies in African societies in different ways and thus create different dynamics of Chinese presence in Africa, which need to be distinguished.

Researchers have also looked at reasons for Chinese migration to African countries. They found that Chinese expatriates, working for large, often state-owned companies, have a strong motivation to work in African countries due to monetary reasons and seek to relieve their financial responsibilities at home (Driessen 2016). Many Chinese have financial responsibilities at home such as mortgages, fees for education of their children or care for family members. Some companies offer a salary almost twice what employees would receive in China, with additional subsidies for working abroad and paid expenses for family members included (Fei 2018). Cook et al. (2016) argue that a combination of push and pull factors are now providing Chinese with opportunities to go to Africa. One of these push factors is the increasingly saturated labour market in China. But based on their ethnographic research in the agri-food sector in Ethiopia, they claim that for many Chinese it was not merely a question of making money. "The theme of wanting to go out to improve oneself, to see the wider world, came up repeatedly in conversations with Chinese migrants in Africa" (2016: 67). Their research also shows that with regards to the agri-food sector in Ethiopia, Chinese migrants are mostly independent actors with no support from the Chinese government. They do not seem to follow any larger agenda, but simply try to make a living in a place perceived as still having a lot of opportunities. Far from the stereotype of the successful Chinese entrepreneur, many Chinese face hardships, fight with obstacles and struggle to make ends meet (French 2015, Cook et al. 2016).

2.1.2. The bidirectional nature of Africa-China relations

Generally, Africa-China relations have been portrayed as Chinese state companies and entrepreneurs moving unidirectionally from China to Africa. But scholars have highlighted the bi-directional nature of Africa-China relations. Adams Bodomo (2010) was among the first to shed light on the growing migration from Africa to China and an emerging African community in the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou. Some of these Africans live in China only for weeks or months, while others remain for years. He argues that African migrant communities act as linguistic, cultural and economic bridges between their source and host communities, even in the middle of tensions created by immigration restrictions and irregularities. Roberto Castillo, an expert on the African community in Guangzhou, estimated the number of Africans living in the city to be between 15'000 and 25'000 people (Luedi 2018). According to Castillo "[...] the presence and intermingling of diverse transient subjects (both African and Chinese) nurtures 'alternative imaginations' of self, place, home, and belonging that alter extant notions of national and cultural identity, ethnicity and race in twenty-first century Asia" (2014: 235).

Gordon Mathews et al. (2017) present ethnographic accounts of how “the Chinese dream” has drawn thousands of Africans to Guangzhou for business reasons, to establish an artistic career or to follow studies at a Chinese university. He eschews the over-reported influence of multinational corporations, arguing that globalisation’s greatest impact has been the web of connections created between individuals, who are mainly holders of small-scale businesses around the world. Further, he gives us insights about the formal and informal economies established by African traders, the hardships they face in China (often due to their unregulated status and difficulties to obtain or prolong a visa) and the personal relations unfolding between Chinese and Africans.

As I will show in chapter 4, many Ethiopian merchants and shop owners I have met during my field research have travelled to China for business reasons and maintain vivid trade networks with partners overseas. I will refer to Castillo’s and Mathews’ work where relevant to further illustrate the dynamics of low-end globalisation that characterise current Ethio-China relations.

2.1.3. Research on African`s perception of Africa-China relationships

Different organisations and researchers have tried to measure the approval of Chinese presence by African citizens in quantitative ways. Attitude surveys have generally shown that the approval for Chinese citizens presence on the African continent by African people is higher than the fears associated to it. Afrobarometer’s 2016 survey (Samson et al. 2016) with 54’000 respondents in 36 African countries is to date the biggest Pan-African attitude survey on Africa-China relations, based on face-to-face interviews and with nationally representative samples. The results show that 63 percent of Africans say China’s influence is “somewhat” or “very” positive, while only 15 percent see it as somewhat/very negative. Favourable views are most common in Mali (92%), Niger (84%) and Liberia (81%). The most important factors contributing to a positive image of China in Africa are its infrastructural development and business investments. The survey respondents were mainly positive about the cost of China’s products, while their quality was often a cause of dissatisfaction. Interestingly, political and social considerations ranked low among factors affecting China’s image on the continent.

Mohan et al. (2014) in their study on Ghana and Nigeria find that 42% of Ghanaians and 54 % of Nigerians felt that Chinese had positive effects on them and their families, while 55 % in both countries felt their standard of living had increased as a result of the Chinese presence. Explanations for this impression were related to job creation, the opportunity to learn new skills and the importance of new technology. Ngome (2009), in an older attitude survey for Cameroon, found that although 70 percent of respondents were concerned by the growing number of Chinese, yet 79 percent recommended that relations between China and Cameroon should continue, but with some modifications.

Fei Ling Wang & Esi A. Elliot (2014) in their surveys and field research from 8 African countries found that while the inflow of Chinese investments and the infrastructure as well as the policy of non-intervention in domestic politics was highly welcomed by Africans, the feelings towards the Chinese migrants coming to their country were much less favourable. They found incidents of Chinese racism towards Africans, which they consider a possible explanation for negative attitudes towards Chinese migrants. They also observed a co-relationship between the socio-political status of Africans and their attitude towards the Chinese presence, with business elites being more welcoming towards Chinese presence while the nationalistic and the liberal leaning elites as well as displaced local traders and business owners were increasingly concerned regarding the Chinese presence. It can be said, that while attitudes related to the economic influence by Chinese companies is generally seen positive, the cultural implications are considered as less positive, but with considerable differences between countries.

2.2. Ethio-China relations: infrastructures, investments and business migrants

Vignette 1: "They don't fear God!"

Dire Dawa, Sunday 27.01.2019, around noon: I leave the "African Village", my guesthouse for a couple of days, around noon. In front of the guesthouse stands a Chinese truck branded "Sinotruck / CNHTC". I take a picture of the sign, simply because I have seen this type of truck many times all over Ethiopia in the past days. I took the Sinotruck sign as a representation of China's growing presence in Ethiopia. The Italian Ivecos, which were once omnipresent on Ethiopia's overland roads, now being replaced more and more with Chinese models. The brand of a European nation that once put a lot of effort into colonizing Ethiopia (and has largely failed to do so), is now gradually being ousted by the Chinese Sinotrucks. Spinning the metaphor of the changing provenance of trucks in Ethiopia further, one might ask: Will China ultimately succeed in Italy's unfinished mission to colonise Ethiopia? Are Chinese trucks a harbinger of Ethiopia's increasing "sinoisation"?

A man of about 30 in a camouflage t-shirt, khaki trousers and a polished bald head, comes running out of an inner courtyard where an Evangelical mass has just been held. "Chinese no good," he says to me as I take pictures, explaining that he has worked with Chinese in Dire Dawa for ten years. Now he wants nothing more to do with them. "They come here in large numbers and make big profits. But for us there are only a few Birr." But what seems to be even more shocking to him is the fact that most Chinese are atheists: "They don't fear God!" He believes to know that Canadians and Americans (it is not the first time I've been taken for an American) are different and that we, in clear distinction to the other Chinese, fear God. "You are good people," the man tells me and disappears.

The described episode represents some of the encounters and conversations I had experienced during my field research in Ethiopia. In the man's reaction to my interest in the new Chinese infrastructure resonate a multitude of experiences of Ethiopians with Chinese migrants. Some elements were repeatedly brought up in encounters and discussions: "The Chinese" are perceived as a large crowd. Their business practices are often described as unfair because the profits from their Ethiopian operations remain primarily in Chinese hands. Frequently expressed fears were also a loss of Ethiopia's autonomy because of the mass of Chinese people and Chinese investments as well as infrastructure in the country. This was often accompanied by a feeling that only the ruling elite in the country, especially those within the EPRDF, were benefiting from relations with China.

On a more personal level, the lack of faith of many Chinese is perceived as strange and ominous. For most Orthodox Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia, the two largest religious groups in Ethiopia, it is unimaginable that anyone could not follow a religion and a deity. As I experienced, the belief in God for many Ethiopians is an

important criterion for distinguishing between "good people" and "bad people". Faith, ethnicity and community play a central role in the daily lives of Ethiopian people (Xiaoyang & Eom 2019) and working schedules are therefore largely adapted to the rhythm of religious holidays and feasts of which there are plenty in the Ethiopian calendar. These are central moments for reassuring people and group identities. Ethiopians therefore find it difficult to comprehend atheism and the enormous importance attached to work and economical success in Chinese culture. On the other hand, Chinese find it difficult to comprehend the Ethiopian attachment to religion and their faith group, as well as their fear of God.

2.2.1. History, scale and places of interaction

The first official political contacts between China and Ethiopia go back to the Bandung conference in Indonesia in 1955, which aimed to promote Afro-Asian economic and cultural cooperation as well as to oppose western colonialism. After many years of sleeping diplomatic relations due to the conflict with Eritrea and Beijing's support for the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and the alignment of the Derg regime with Russia, prime minister Meles Zenawi started to reengage with China in the mid-1990s (Fei et al. 2018). Since coming to power in 1991, the EPRDF government has been engaged in a political state-building project to completely transform all aspects of Ethiopian society, with the Asian "tiger states" as a role model for a developmental state (Cheru 2016). In 1995, Prime Minister Zenawi visited China and encouraged Chinese investors to come and invest in Ethiopia and offered them all necessary incentives to succeed. In 1998, a Joint Ethiopia-China Commission (JECC) was established between Ethiopia's Ministry of Finance and Economic Development (MOFED) and China's Ministry of Finance and Commerce (MOFCOM) (Cheru 2016). Under the rule of Meles Zenawi, the two partners shared common views regarding the superior priority of economic growth over democracy and personal freedom, which nurtured the intensification of their partnership. China's high stakes in Ethiopia first appeared to a broader spectrum of observers during the first Forum on China Africa Co-operation (FOCAC) in 2000, while the second FOCAC in 2003 was already held in Ethiopia's capital Addis Ababa (Nicolas 2017).

Chinese involvement in infrastructure development and financing has become extensive over the years. Chinese companies are now involved in the power sector (mainly in hydro-power projects), in rail and road construction (in 70 percent of the road network Chinese companies were involved) and the telecommunication sector (with Chinese ZTE and Huawei developing 3G and 4G networks for Ethiopia) (Cheru 2016). Despite its lack of natural resources, Ethiopia has managed to become one of China's top trading partners and investment destinations since the 1980s. In 2012, China was Ethiopia's most important trading partner, behind the EU. While Ethiopia's exports to China were negligible, imports stood at 1.31 billion Euros, leaving a large trade deficit (Cheru 2016).

The ambitious goal set by the Ethiopian government in its Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP) is to become a middle-income country by 2025. Attracting Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) is at the heart of the Ethiopian industrialisation and modernisation strategy, with a focus on FDI in specific sectors such as textile and apparel, leather products, agro-processing, pharmaceuticals and chemicals (Fei 2018). China is therefore heavily engaged in the development of Special Economic Zones (SEZ) and Industrial Parks (IPs) throughout the country, in many cases carried out by Chinese companies and supported by the Ethiopian government to boost the manufacturing sector. The government attracts investments in industrial zones by selling land to foreign investors at one Dollar per square metre per month, tax holidays for up to seven years and customs on site (Nicolas 2017). In addition to government-sponsored IPs, several private owned IPs were developed.

By the end of 2016, 19 SEZs were either operational or in a constructing or planning phase (Fei 2018). While not all of them were Chinese, four Chinese companies – China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC), CGC Overseas Construction Group (CGCOCG) and Communications Construction Corporation (CCCC) were involved in at least 9 of the SEZs. Ethiopia's SEZs have become an important element of China's "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI). Ethiopia was one of only two African countries with high-level delegation representation at the first Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation held in May 2017 (Belt & Road News 2019). The Chinese-built and financed the 756 kilometres long Ethiopia-Djibouti electrified railway, which connects landlocked Ethiopia to Djibouti's port along the Red Sea is another key element of the BRI.

China's investments in Ethiopia do not fit the stereotype of Chinese engagement in Africa. Ethiopia is not known for its oil or other precious natural resources, which is the leading argument for Chinese presence in other countries like Sudan, Angola or Zambia. Different to many other African countries Chinese investments are directed mainly into the manufacturing sector (Nicolas 2017). Of the total of 1094 Chinese investment projects registered with the Ethiopian Investment Agency between 1998 and 2014, more than half are in the manufacturing sector, while construction and real estate is the second most important area of China's direct investment in Ethiopia (Cheru 2016).

The assumption that China fills job vacancies mostly with its own people and therefore does not provide any job opportunities for Africans is misleading in the case of Ethiopia (see also Marsh n.d.). Chinese manufacturing companies in industrial parks all over Ethiopia employ mostly Ethiopian workers. According to Mulugeta (2018) Chinese companies in 2018 employed 97 651 Ethiopians. He calculated the potential of planned Chinese projects to create job opportunities for 291 924 Ethiopians, with the majority of these jobs created in manufacturing and the construction sector. Ethiopian government has traditionally seen low wages as a blessing and a comparative advantage to cure the country's economic malaise. Gelan (2018) has calculated that wage rates Chinese firms pay in Ethiopian factories range between 6% to 14% the prevailing wages in China. Chinese companies now deliberately choose Ethiopia as a manufacturing site because of its low salaries¹¹. Ethiopia has become an integral part of the Belt and Road Initiative not because it is rich in natural resources, but because of its abundance of cheap labour, its preferential conditions for Chinese investors provided by the government and its relative proximity to Chinese harbours.

2.2.2. Chinese expatriates and migrant communities in Ethiopia

According to Cook (2016), between 20'000 and 40'000 Chinese live and work in Ethiopia. Addis Ababa is so far the only Ethiopian city with a large Chinese community and with a considerable number of Chinese restaurants and shops. Many Chinese in Ethiopia are hired by large, multinational and often state-owned companies for infrastructure building and maintenance projects or by Chinese manufacturing companies that produce goods for domestic or export markets, mainly based in industrial parks (Cheru 2016). A big share of job opportunities for Ethiopians related to the Chinese presence in their country are within industrial parks, either fully developed and led by Chinese companies or developed and built by Chinese companies for the Ethiopian government and with a big share of Chinese companies operating there.

Fei has done extensive research about employees of Chinese companies operating in Addis Ababa (Fei et al. 2018) and Ethiopian labourers and Chinese managers working in the Eastern Industry Zone (Fei 2018), a Chinese-led industrial park close to the capital. She found that

¹¹ According to the ILO, Ethiopian workers between 2010 and 2012 had one of the lowest average monthly income in comparison to other African countries (Gelan 2018).

Chinese expatriates that work in industrial parks mostly live within company compounds while white-collar clerks in Addis Ababa mostly live within residences with a mainly Chinese clientele. Chinese statuses as “expatriates” come with privileges provided by the company. Most living expenses are covered by the company and most of the employees have spent less than 10 percent of their salaries every month. Some companies provided Chinese-only canteens, Chinese-only shuttles to go to work, sport equipment and social events with employees of other Chinese companies. As everywhere in the world, interactions and cultural exchange among other things go through food: In one incident described by the authors (Fei et al. 2018), a Chinese company did not provide a canteen, but the Chinese managed to teach their Ethiopian housemaid to cook Chinese food and paid her additional money to prepare Chinese dishes for them.

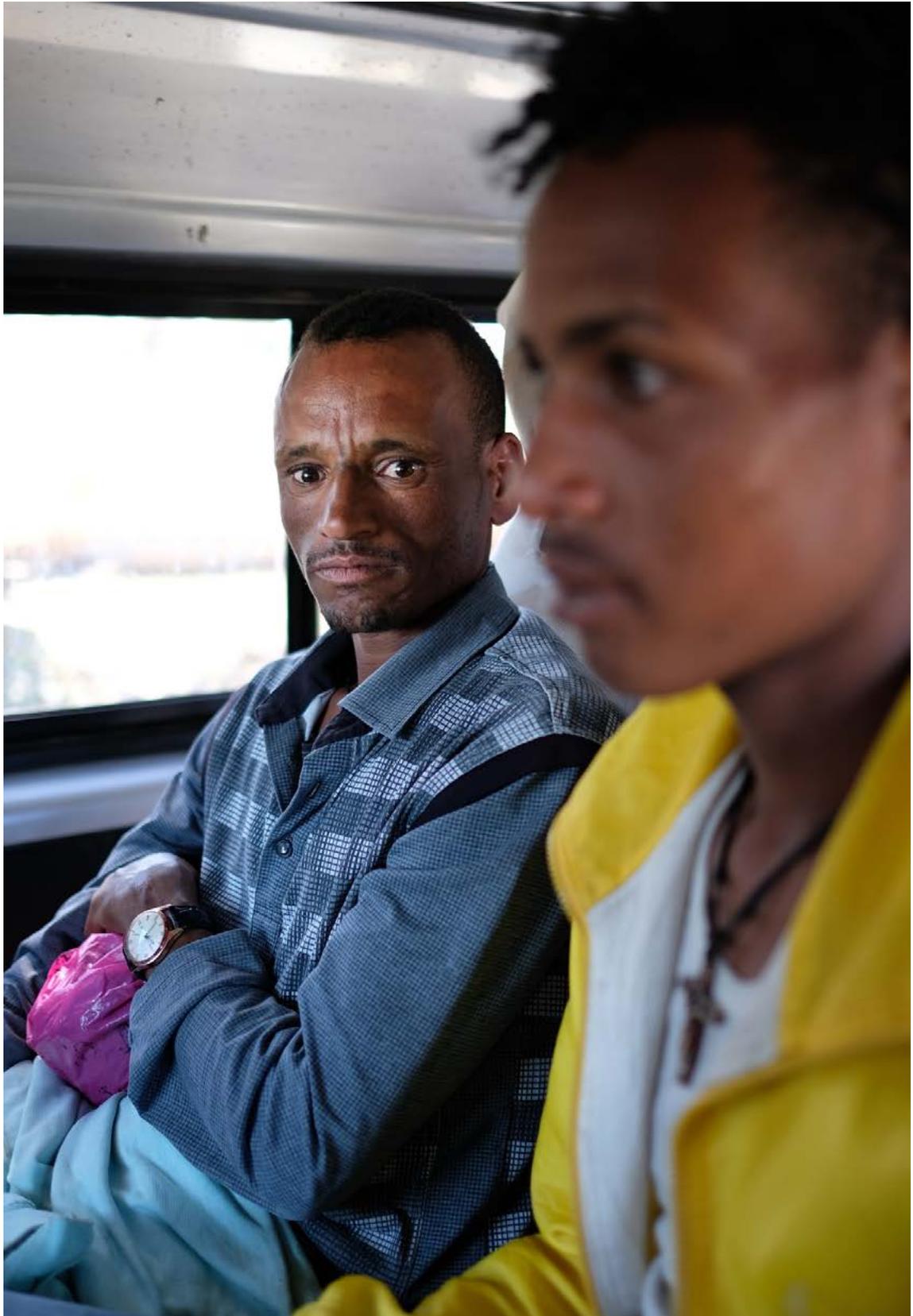
Interactions of Chinese expatriates and business migrants¹² with Ethiopians are predominantly unfolding during work. Chinese investors often mentioned the low labour costs in Ethiopia as their main incentive for doing business in Ethiopia. Complaints about the lack of skilled labour and the time necessary to train local workers were frequent though. It seems that many of the Chinese expatriates have spent very little time in making themselves familiar with the education standard, the living and working conditions that characterise the Ethiopian society. Chinese business migrants in Ethiopia generally do not speak the national language Amharic and have no or only basic English competences. Ethiopian workers therefore find language and communication with their Chinese bosses and colleagues one of the most challenging part of their work.

As one can experience when moving around in the country, Ethio-China relations have a strong spatial aspect. Distribution of the Chinese community within Ethiopia and the potential places of interaction between Ethiopians and Chinese is very uneven. This is not only true on a national scale, but also on an urban scale. Data on the geographical presence of Chinese workers in Ethiopia is scarce. By tracking Chinese workers of Yuqi Autos and Huaxia Telecom with GPS, Fei et al. (2018) were able to show that most Chinese expatriates’ activities take place along the Bole Road, a very central and modern region of Addis Ababa with many shopping malls and western style restaurants lined up. They conclude: “[...] our mapping exercise suggests that Chinese expatriates still live and socialize in very confined geographic areas, and are yet to fully engage with their host country environment” (2018: 21).

¹² I refer to “expatriates” where Chinese work for big corporations which often provide benefits such as housing, food and fixed contracts for their employees (Fei 2018). “Business migrants” relates to owners and employees of small and medium-sized enterprises, who normally not profit from such amenities.

Photo gallery

Labour force and industrial parks

















2.3. Conflicting narratives about Africa-China relations

“As Ethiopia embarked on huge infrastructure development, the engagement of Chinese companies, from road to railway infrastructure construction sectors, is widely considered as a connecting bridge to the East African country's aspirations. Ethiopians, who have recently witnessed modern road and railway infrastructure projects built with Chinese technologies and standards, speak highly of Chinese engagement in Ethiopia's booming transportation sector in particular and the country's development in general.”

(Xinhua Net 2018)

"China finds everything it needs in Africa. Not only mineral resources, but also agricultural land. Basically, China dreams of an Africa without Africans. So, the future could be that all Africans go to Europe and we leave Africa to the Chinese."

(Joseph Tonda in Stührenberg 2018, author`s translation from German)

The interpretation of Africa-China relations has been heavily contested and different actors have stressed different (often conflicting) narratives¹³ to explain meaning of and reasons for China's engagement on the African continent. While many different narratives exist¹⁴, I will focus on two main strains in the rest of this thesis: An alarmist narrative based on the assumption that China's presence in Africa is mainly benefitting China to the expense of African countries; and a narrative based on the assumption that both China and African countries and its people will benefit from the Africa-China relations.

¹³ When I was working on an article about the rising amount of Chinese aid in Africa, I interviewed Franklyn Lisk, a professor at the University of Warwick, who was born and raised in Sierra Leone. He framed China`s involvement on the continent in rather positive terms, while most non-African interlocutors I had spoken with for the article focused on potential dangers of Chinese aid in Africa (Schlaefli 2019a).

¹⁴ Fantu Cheru (2016) has identified four different types of views on emerging countries impact on developments in Africa: the alarmists, the sceptics, the critics of new imperialism, and the cheerleaders. The alarmists perceive the rise of donors like China to be a threat to the dominance of traditional Western powers. The sceptics defend the current development system. The critics warn of a fragmentation of aid, leading to new forms of dependence while the cheerleaders focus almost entirely on the opportunities. Cheru considers himself as a cheerleader and concludes that the benefit of China's engagement for African countries ultimately depends of African agency.

2.3.1. Yellow peril and neo-colonialisation?

US administrations, with the current Trump administration in the midst of a trade war with China, have long enforced a narrative framing China's engagement in Africa as "colonial" or "neo-colonial". Most famously, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, during a visit in Lusaka in 2011 warned their hosts concerning "new colonialism in Africa" and accused China to follow the example of past colonialists, namely "to come in, take out natural resources, pay off leaders and leave" (Reuters 2011). Seven years later, Rex Tillerson followed Clintons footsteps and enforced the US worries about the billion-dollar investments made by China (BBC News 2018). In a policy briefing at the Heritage Foundation in December 2018, US National Security Adviser John Bolton has claimed that Africa has fallen victim to Beijing's predatory intentions, saying: "China uses bribes, opaque agreements, and the strategic use of debt to hold states in Africa captive to Beijing's wishes and demands" (The White House 2018).

China has frequently been described by US politicians as an 'economic exploiter' of Africa, with Chinese trade and investment seen as the drivers of unequal trade patterns, taking advantage of exploitative working conditions and engaging in land grabbing. Some researchers have criticized that European politicians and journalist are following these narratives without due consideration: "Many myths, fed by political discourse and the media, permeate European views of China's engagement in Africa. These depict China as interested chiefly in economic gain and political domination, and as a neo-colonial or imperialist power" (Karkare et al. 2020: 2). Critics insinuate China that its investments mainly follow self-interests, led by its hunger for resources like oil, rare metals, copper and gold (Siu and McGovern 2017) and find evidence for that claim in countries like Angola or Zambia. Angola is China's second largest provider of oil, while copper from Zambia is heavily needed by China for its ICT manufacturing sector. François Nicolas (2017) therefore argued that large-scale mining and agribusiness projects are the main purposes of China's presence on the African continent, without any major gains for the local people.

In a major report that has been widely taken up by the media, Human Rights Watch (2011) has claimed that Chinese-run copper mining companies in Zambia routinely flout labour laws and regulations designed to protect workers safety and the right to organise¹⁵. Media has brought attention to the fact that farmers sometimes are dislocated by African governments without or with insufficient compensation in order to build or enlarge industrial parks constructed or owned by Chinese companies (Gardner 2018). Critics also point out that Chinese companies mostly bring their own work force, thus limiting the flow of knowledge and financial resources to the African workforce (Siu & McGovern 2017). Lately China was heavily accused of following a "debt trap diplomacy"¹⁶, pushing African countries to take loans for projects they could not afford and thus becoming dependent on China's goodwill and interests. The fact that China as well as many African countries rank high on Transparency International Corruption Perception Index, further provokes fears that governmental deals do not benefit primarily the people, but the officials involved. Moreover, research has shown that Chinese investment projects and corruption of African officials often go hand in hand, different from projects which involved donors such as the World Bank (Isaksson & Kotsadam 2018).

¹⁵ Mohan et al. 2014 have argued that these firms were not better or worse from other non-Chinese companies in the same industry. Their findings suggest that rather than a Chinese problem, the labour conditions are a consequence of globalised capitalism, with transnational companies fighting over prices and benefit margins.

¹⁶ Bräutigam (2019) argues that "debt-trap diplomacy" is merely a meme, created by an Indian think tank and globally publicised by western academics and media. The author denounces the meme as the most recent unfounded accusation by western commentators regarding China's involvement in Africa.

Such negative narratives about the Chinese engagement in Africa do not only come from western countries but have also found its way into books, articles and declarations of famous African intellectuals (as the second quote in the beginning of this chapter shows). Felwine Sarr for example, describes the encroachment of the Chinese economy on the African continent as a threat. In his view the Chinese infrastructure comes in return for the “plundering” of Africa’s resources and the “colonisation” of its land (Sarr 2019: 59).

2.3.2. Mutual benefit and deep transformation?

The Chinese government, official Chinese media and many African heads of state, as well as some researchers (Cheru 2016, Bräutigam 2009), highlight the win-win character of Africa-China relations and the opportunities such co-operations bring to the African continent as a whole. China’s state press agency Xinhua regularly releases uncritical and to a large extent positively framed stories about Chinese infrastructure projects in African countries (see quotation at the beginning of this chapter), which are frequently taken up by media outlets and online platforms in many African countries.

A major player in shaping positive narratives about Africa-China relations in politics and broader Chinese and African public is the “Forum on China–Africa Cooperation” (FOCAC). On its website the objectives of the forum are described with the following words: “Equal consultation, enhancing understanding, expanding consensus, strengthening friendship and promoting cooperation” (FOCAC 2020). The 3rd Forum in 2018 in Beijing was officially titled “China and Africa: Toward an Even Stronger Community with a Shared Future through Win-Win Cooperation.” Presidents, Vice-Presidents or Prime Ministers of all African countries were present at the forum. At least from this moment on, it was evident that the majority of African elites are (at least publicly) optimistic about the role of China in their countries. Famously, Rwandan president Paul Kagame, at that time chairperson of the African Union, lauded the Chinese aid and investment strategy in Africa at the forum as a source of “deep transformation” based on mutual respect and for the benefit of both partners (in Maru 2019). Moreover, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa summarised the position of African state elites by saying that: “Africa refutes the view that a new colonialism is taking hold in Africa as our detractors would have us believe” (also cited in Maru 2019).

African elites often characterise the Chinese way of investing as refreshingly efficient, especially in terms of infrastructure construction. They note the lack of planning meetings, environmental impact reports and other bureaucratic hurdles that are typical for projects sponsored by Euro-American nations or international organisations, such as the World Bank or IMF (Rupp in Rotberg: 2008). Former Senegalese president Abdoulaye Wade publicly expressed his joy about China as a donor and about African nations not anymore having to accept funding and restrictions by Euro-American partners. Chinese loans have enabled many African governments to avoid pressure from global governance institutions such as IMF and the World Bank. In the past, these institutions have pushed for economic and political reforms such as the infamous structural adjustment programmes between 1980 and 2000 which in many cases have not served the interest of African people at all (Samba Sylla 2020). That is part of the reason why some African politicians and commentators now believe that China, with its own rapid economic success, is better suited to be a role model for African countries than western countries (Conway-Smith 2012).

2.3.3. Critique and problematisation of the dominant narratives

Researchers have stated that Africa-China narratives are often characterised by one-sided, simplifying and dualistic views, which tend to either glorify or demonise China’s engagement in Africa. A lively debate has emerged about why such concepts as “colonialism”, “neo-colonialism”, but also “mutual benefit” and “win-win-relationship” fail to describe the manifold

entanglements between China and African countries (Rupp in Rotberg 2008; Strauss 2013; Mohan & Lampert 2013; Mohan et al. 2014; Lee 2017). They have analysed and problematised the narratives and mostly agree that such terms hold no analytical potential for understanding the China-African entanglements. Much more, they resonate with many people's preconceptions, often heavily preoccupied by European and US history, than with the empirical findings on the ground.

Mehari Taddele Maru (2019) has argued, that much of the academic literature on Africa-China partnerships unjustifiably perpetuates the Sino-phobic narrative, with media wrongly portraying China as a predatory actor in Africa¹⁷. Based on a Brookings study he argues that China's investments in the extractive industry are largely over reported compared to other sectors when taking into account that only one third of Chinese investments in Africa go to natural resource extraction, while the rest is invested in infrastructure, construction, electricity production, manufacturing and finance. He concludes: "The Sino-phobic narrative championed by the West portrays African nations as passive collaborators, as mere victims of a second 'colonisation' wave. However, this is not the case" (2019). Maru describes four reasons why China is a preferred partner for African countries: Unconditional soft loans and access to capital; quick delivery of services and cheap goods; funding of peacekeeping and an alternative development model.

Stephanie Rupp has criticised the framing in colonial terms and argued that China's involvement in Africa is neither colonial nor neo-colonial. "Instead China is strategically leveraging structural characteristics of African political and economic systems that advance the interests of the state – both the Chinese state and African states – often at the expense of ordinary African people" (in Rotberg 2008: 66). Rupp sees significant divergences from colonialism, such as China's fundamental respect for the sovereignty of African states, the active engagements in international political fora and the interest in African people as consumers rather than labourers. She emphasises that contrary to Europe's colonial exploitation of Africa, China has an abundant supply of own inexpensive labour, and therefore only makes limited use of African labour¹⁸. Rupp suggests viewing Africa-China relations in terms of post-colonial relations of interdependency, within a postcolonial world order in which nations do not tolerate the ambitions of hegemonic domination anymore.

A lot of media and research on Africa-China relations is characterised by an unsatisfying disaggregation of "the Chinese" involved in China-Africa relations. There are now many different "Chinas" and "Chinese" involved in these relations (Mohan et al. 2014). Official state to state relations and infrastructure projects of large Chinese state-owned, transnational companies make up only parts of the ever more complex entanglements. Jing Gu (2009) estimated that 85 percent of Chinese companies investing in Africa are privately owned with the majority being small businesses. A great number of Chinese business migrants with very diverse backgrounds are now independently motivated by their desires to improve their lives (Wang & Elliot 2014). As Chinese firms and family run businesses face fierce competition in China, their motivations have become bigger to reach out and migrate in order to find new market opportunities on the African continent¹⁹. These small companies operate outside state

¹⁷ The Chinese government did not miss a chance to republish Taddele Maru's opinion piece (originally published on Al Jazeera) on its own FOCAC website. A move that can be understood as general approval to Maru's narrative by the Chinese government.

¹⁸ While this was certainly true for Chinese engagement in specific African states and in the first years after the millennium, it does not apply anymore for China's involvement in Ethiopia today, as we will see in chapter 4.

¹⁹ For an in-depth journalistic account on Chinese entrepreneurs' experiences in a handful of African countries see Howard French's book "China's second continent: how a million migrants are building a new empire in Africa" (2015).

sponsored structures and are a direct consequence of a dynamic that has been labelled as “low-end globalisation” (Mathews et al. 2017). It seems that most of the alarmists as well as some of the cheerleaders of Africa-China relations create caricature-like images of Chinese engagement in Africa, without any appreciation for the diversity of the actors involved and with disregard of the historical underpinnings on which China’s engagement in Africa is based (see also Karkare et al. 2020).

2.3.4. Narratives about Ethio-China relations

In general, the same conflicting narratives apply to China engagement in Ethiopia as for other African countries. Ethiopia has been portrayed as “the next China” or the “China of Africa” (Tyler 2018) because of the many Chinese firms relocating their production to Ethiopia following the cheap labour costs in the country. But the overall benefit of Ethiopian citizens from its governments push to boost infrastructure construction, job creation and manufacturing capacities through close cooperation with China is contested. Françoise Nicolas (2017: 35) has concluded that “[a]lthough Chinese investments was hoped to contribute to the countries industrialisation, there is no discernible sign yet. Ethiopia has registered high growth rates but little transformation. For the time being, the winners are all on the same (Chinese) side: Chinese investors are seizing the opportunity in Ethiopia to move some of their manufacturing offshore from China to lower-cost production sites.” Fantu Cheru on the other hand argues that “Chinese loans and investments in the infrastructure sector have played an important role in unleashing Ethiopia’s productive potential” (2016: 601). He is also convinced that: “[t]he Ethiopian experience challenges the school of thought that equates the rise of emerging powers in Africa with a new form of 'colonialism', disregarding African agency to transform these relationships into 'win-win' partnerships” (Cheru 2016: 592).

A promising means to learn more about the Ethiopians own narrative of the Chinese presence in their country is the analysis of Ethiopian cultural artefacts with a relation to China or “the Chinese”. Alessandro Jedlowski and Michael W. Thomas (2017) have analysed the recent phenomenon of Ethiopian films which feature Chinese characters. The researchers focus on two film releases that were extremely popular with the movie-going public in Ethiopia’s capital Addis Ababa. “Made in China” (2012) and “Zeraff” (2011) both feature eastern Asians (not only Chinese) in prominent roles and the Chinese film characters are central to the films’ plot. According to the authors, close relations between the Ethiopian and the Chinese government has contributed to an already rigidly centralised media environment, with local government authorities controlling images about the Chinese presence in Ethiopia. But a thriving digital film industry in Addis Ababa nowadays targets local and diasporic audiences and has created an arena of debate concerned with present-day Ethiopian reality. Even though independent films also have to go through the state-run control panels for release authorisation, the contemporary film sector shows a degree of freedom not known within the older state monopolised sector. Hence, these films sometimes show alternative narratives to the ones shown by state-controlled media.

In “Made in China” for example foreign workers are shown as better and more trustworthy than Ethiopian workers, leading Ethiopians to place their full trust in Chinese leadership. In “Zeraff” the father is killed by a faulty Chinese-made electricity generator during a power cut, which points to one of the most common stereotypes about the poor quality and faultiness of Chinese products in African countries. In the authors analysis, the culture clash shown in the film is not only about the presence and otherness of the Chinese itself, but serves as a covertly critique of the generational dislocation within the upcoming middle-classes of Ethiopia. Moreover, the authors conclude that Chinese people represent a form of cultural and racial otherness which is far from being fully accepted as part of this imagined ‘Ethiopian Self’. They also point to the fact that in most Sub-Saharan African countries discourses about national identity exclude racial multiplicity. A Chinese-looking Ethiopian person still seems to be unthinkable for the majority of Ethiopians.

However, the reactions towards the film were nearly as interesting as the interpretation of its content. The use of a multi-layered structure of meaning has not automatically protected the film from censorship and government control. “Zeraff” in fact provoked indignation among government officials in reaction to the bad attitude towards Chinese people the film seemed to transmit. According to one of the authors’ informants, the film could not be marketed through Ethiopian radio, because for government officials it was not supporting the Chinese people reputation in Ethiopia enough. As a result, “Zeraff” provoked critical reactions which finally lead to the film being withdrawn from cinemas. This draws light to the fact that in Ethiopia, as for Africa-China in general, at least two conflicting layers of perception exist regarding the Chinese presence in Ethiopia: For the Ethiopian public the outcome of this presence seems to be ambiguous, charged with (potential) conflicts and fears, which were taken up by the filmmakers. For the government authorities on the other hand, the positive influence of the Chinese presence in Ethiopia is a given which has to be promoted by the media. Hence, officially, images of a constructive and positively charged cooperation between the two people must be protected against other narratives, like the ones shown in the films mentioned.

2.4. Agency and its role in Africa-China relations

Vignette 2: Prepare for emerging opportunities

Addis Ababa, 10.01.2019, around 6pm: Our car is stuck in traffic jam. Every afternoon hundreds of thousands of people try to make their way home from offices, construction sites, roadside teashops and restaurants. An avalanche of minibuses, individual cars and motorbikes moves through the streets of Addis Ababa like a chewy raisin. An unpleasant, time-consuming and unhealthy ritual most residents of Addis Ababa have to go through every day. As we continue our drive, we pass the tracks of one of the most visible Chinese infrastructure projects in the city: the Lightrail²⁰ that now connects outskirts in east, west, north and south Addis Ababa with the city centre. Then, suddenly, another outstanding Ethio-Chinese landmark appears: the new headquarter of the “Commercial Bank”, a 46-storey building made of cement, iron and glass²¹. As we come close to our final destination, we leave the widened Bole ring road²² that has at least smoothed traffic a little bit in recent years. There

²⁰ The 475 million USD Light Rail Project (LRT) is a joint venture between Ethiopia and China. It was 85 percent financed by the Export-Import Bank of China through a loan agreement and built by the China Railway Eryuan Engineering Group. The LRT provides capacity for 15,000 passengers per hour in each direction (Centre for Public Impact 2016).

²¹ After its completion and with 198 meters, it will by far be the biggest building in the city and according to marketing claims “the tallest structure in East Africa” (Nazret 2015). The contractor for the realisation of the building is the “China State Construction Engineering Corporation” (CSCEC). The people I have met in Addis Ababa agreed that no Ethiopian construction company would have been able to build a tower like this.

²² The 4.3km long “Meskel Square – Bole Ring Road” was upgraded with a 60 million USD loan from the Export-Import Bank of China and opened in 2013 (2Merkato.com 2013).

on the corner, a Chinese engineer from Huawei with a yellow helmet, stands in front of a telecommunication box, full of colourful cables²³.

Our driver pulls the car over onto a parking lot in front of a 5-storey building with undisguised cement walls and small shops and offices inside. We climb the stairs to the second floor and find Eyoel in front of a space with a sign that reads “Chu Chinese Language School”. Inside, a handful of people sit in a classroom, four meters long, 2 meters wide, with a neatly cleaned and shiny stone floor, whitewashed walls and a chalk board on the front wall. While the teacher reads out loud phrases in Chinese²⁴, more students enter the classroom, late because of the afternoon traffic. After a couple of minutes, the class is complete with seven students. They repeat the phrases of their teacher and work on their pronunciation. The teacher does not want me to take pictures or records. But he allows me to ask the students some questions. A woman in her mid-30s with long shiny black hair and a golden watch says: “China is now everywhere in Africa. Therefore, if we want to do business, we have to learn Chinese.” She works for an insurance company and wants to advance her career by working with Chinese clients. The others in the class agree. They work in hotels, in the construction industry or in banks and they want to profit from new opportunities which came up with the Chinese presence in their country.

After the class I have a chance to talk to Eyoel, the teacher. He decided to learn Chinese in 2011, the same year I had first visited Ethiopia and wondered about the many Chinese construction sites in the capital. It was that year, Eyoel tells me, when he realised that more and more Chinese are involved in doing business in Ethiopia. He speaks English better than most of the Ethiopians I have met. While studying civil engineering at Addis Ababa university, he took classes in Chinese at the Confucius Institute at the university and did so well that the institute offered him a one-year scholarship at a university close to Beijing. “I decided to go and abandoned my plan to do a masters in Ethiopia”, he says. Once there, he spent most of the time to perfect his Chinese language skills. Back in Addis Ababa, he established his own Chinese language school, “the first Chinese-only language school in Addis”, he says with proud. Apart from his teaching, he works as a consultant for Chinese construction projects.

I knew that the Chinese had established a Confucius Institute at the University of Addis Ababa and some people told me about a second one at a Technical Vocational Training Centre. Considering the scope of business engagements all over Ethiopia, it was evident that China was interested in training well educated Ethiopians in their language. Efficient cooperation and intercultural work benefits greatly from a common language. However, I did not expect to find Ethiopians that open Chinese language schools

²³ Huawei has established itself across Africa since it launched its business in Kenya in 1998. The company now operates in 40 African countries, providing 4G networks to more than half of the continent (South China Morning Post 2019).

²⁴ I followed the terminology of my interlocutors in using “Chinese” to refer to Mandarin, the most common language spoken in China. It can also refer to a simplified form of Mandarin, sometimes taught in Ethiopian language schools.

themselves. Apparently, the demand for Chinese lessons is higher than what China was willing to provide. Hence, there is a market for Ethiopians with Chinese language skills. As I should learn later on, it was also not a Chinese person who set up the first Amharic-Mandarin learning textbook, but an Ethiopian woman²⁵. It was only the sixth day after my arrival to Addis Ababa. My field research had just begun, and signs of personal agency within the Ethio-China relations had started to appear much earlier than I originally had expected.

2.4.1. Beyond victimisation and paternalism

There is a long history of victimising African people and Africa in general (Sarr 2019). Stereotypes rooted in colonialism about Africans being poor and depending on foreign aid remain until this day. Binyavanga Wainaina has described these stereotypes in his ironical essay 'How to Write About Africa': "Among your characters you must always include The Starving African, who wanders the refugee camp nearly naked, and waits for the benevolence of the West. Her children have flies on their eyelids and pot bellies, and her breasts are flat and empty. She must look utterly helpless" (2019). According to Mirjam de Bruijn et al., the important contributions of the agency perspective to the understanding of social change in Africa has been "[...] its capacity to explode often victimising approaches in exchange for a much more balanced understanding of the local processes at work in Africa" (2007: 1). It is the research focus on agency, they argue, that helped to put African people back in the centre of development policies and to challenge established development models of international institutions such as the World Bank.

The same stereotypes regarding the passivity of African actors can be found in narratives about Africa-China relations. Giles Mohan et al. argued that the focus on China as the driver of Africa-China relationships repeats long standing ways of portraying Africans and Africa. "In such representations Africa is at the whim of external forces, which belies a deeper racist assumption about the inability of Africans to fashion their own destiny" (2014: 11). They proposed a more relational understanding of Africa-China relations.

Giles Mohan and Ben Lampert have called to the importance of "[r]einserting African agency into China-Africa relations" (2013: 92). They found that African actors have negotiated, shaped and even driven Chinese engagements in important ways. Based on field work in Ghana and Nigeria they showed that domestic entrepreneurs play a much more direct role in encouraging the Chinese presence than generally taken in account by sourcing goods, partners, workers and capital from China. What is more, some African employees had carved out significant opportunities for their own advancement by using training opportunities in Chinese telecom companies to find lucrative jobs (with better payment) in other companies later on. Likewise, Deborah Bräutigam (in Alden et al. 2008) argued that Africans with experience working for Chinese companies develop new skills and capabilities to establish spin-off ventures of their own at a later point.

²⁵ Lina, the creator of the so far only Amharic-Mandarin textbook (Dalu: Introduction to Chinese for Amharic Speakers) grew up in Ethiopia and taught public health at a university in China. According to her website, she noticed that a lot of the Chinese sounds could be easily captured with the Amharic alphabet. When she returned to Ethiopia, she was surprised that Chinese-learning materials were almost non-existent in her country, given how intimate the relationship between Ethiopia and China had become. That is when she decided to create an Amharic-Mandarin textbook (Chinese for Ethiopia 2020).

Moreover, there is growing evidence that African companies themselves increasingly view China as a source of skilled labour and hence recruit Chinese workers to increase productivity and boost revenues. Giles Mohan & Ben Lampert (2013) have recounted incidences in which African businessmen were crucial to attract Chinese small-scale entrepreneurs, like in the case of the “China Town” shopping complex in Lagos. A prominent Nigerian businessman and politician, Chief Oladipo, used his good contacts to China to initiate the complex with the help of a Chinese businessman. The authors conclude that “African patrons are able to enact agency in ways that can have an important influence over the fortunes of Chinese ventures” (2013: 103). African agency in Africa-China relations can be seen on various levels and in numerous contexts. Researchers therefore should avoid overly structural accounts that deny African agency and the potential of its transformative character. However, agency should also not be confused with success, equality or fairness, as agency is often very unevenly dispersed.

2.4.2. Theorisation of agency

Human agency has been associated with selfhood, motivation, will, purposiveness, intentionality, choice, initiative, freedom and creativity (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). The focus on agency leads us to the domains of creativity, inventiveness and reflexivity and for Bruijn et al. agency “[...] emphasises the possibilities and opportunities individuals and social groups perceive when faced with the constraints that mark so much of African social life” (2007: 1). They consider agency as a much needed corrective for all the major social science paradigms, from structuralism to Marxism and world-systems theory, which over emphasise the structural restrictions for the individuals, without taking into account the human creativity, inventiveness and resilience involved to counter those restrictions.

However, structural limitations due to economic, social, ethnic, gender or physical constraints remain important and it is the “[...] continuous dialectic engagement between actor and environment that determines agency” and a “[...] constant process of negotiation between structures and actors [...]” (Bruijn et al 2007: 5). Agency can be defined as a human capacity which allows for many different paths to be taken as a reaction of agents to certain social realities. One of the fundamental questions regarding agency therefore is “how to grasp the dichotomy between actor and structure” (Bruijn et al. 2007: 2). Anthony Giddens (1984) in his theory of structuration characterises structure and agency as mutually constitutive and inseparable elements. In this understanding, actors are in any given moment neither completely free and unswayed by the structures their actions are embedded in, nor are their actions completely determined by these structures.

Jane I. Guyer based on her field research in South Africa used the Tswana verb for action, “go dira”, to conceptualise agency in the sense of “do, make or drive”, hence requiring both a subject and an object while leaving open the nature of their interaction and mutual interpretation. She argued that for the Tswana and much of African philosophical work on personhood and ontology, “[...] agency is a capacity to mediate a world that is continually being constituted and inhabited in emergent ways, as is, also, the person or subject itself” (in Adebani 2017: 343). In Guyer’s perspective of political economy of everyday life, agency can be seen as people’s aspiration for creative interventions to maintain and extend liberation of action and workable livelihoods, even in the most mundane circumstances and in their struggles to make a living.

Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische (1998) found that agency is rarely defined clearly as an analytical category in its own right and that while the concept is often used in social science, it is more defined by its opaqueness than by clarity and theorisation. They made important contributions to better define human agency and stressed its temporal character and its embeddedness within the flow of time. The authors were inspired from a range of pragmatist and phenomenological thinkers, first of all by the sociologist George Herbert Mead and his theorisation of temporality. Mead’s “The Philosophy of the Present” (1959) offers them the most compelling tools to overcoming conceptions of agency in rational choice and norm-oriented

approaches. Mead characterised time as a multilevel flow of nested events grounded in present experience. While the reality of agents exists in the present, they are able to imaginatively construct a sense of past and future. Moreover, Mead stressed that human consciousness is constituted through sociality and therefore actors cannot be conceived as atomised individuals but much more as active respondents within nested and overlapping systems. Based on Mead's research, Emirbayer and Mische argue that the structural contexts influencing agency are themselves temporal and agents are always embedded in overlapping ways to order time and orientations towards the past, the future and the present. As actors move within and among different contexts, they switch between temporal orientations and are able to change their relationship to the structure. Therefore, structural environments are dynamically sustained by and altered through human agency. Emirbayer and Mische define human agency as:

"[...] the temporally constructed engagements by actors of different structural environments – the temporal-relational context of action – which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgement, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations." (1998: 970)

They identify three different dimensions of agency relative to their time-orientation (1998: 971): First, the "iterational element" refers to the selective reactivation of past patterns of thought and action as routinely incorporated in practical activity, thereby giving stability and order to social circumstances. This element helps to sustain identities, interactions and institutions over time. Second, the "projective element" refers to the imaginative generation of possible future trajectories of action. Agents are therefore capable of creatively reconfiguring structures of thought and action in relation to their hopes, fears and desires for the future. And third, the "practical-evaluative element" describes the capacity of actors to make practical and normative judgements among alternative trajectories of action in response to the emerging demands, dilemmas and ambiguities of presently evolving situations. This "[...] chordal triad of agency, within which all three dimensions resonate as separate but not always harmonious tones" (Emirbayer & Mische 1998: 972) is to be found in varying degrees within any concrete instance of action, depending on the degree in which they are oriented towards the past, present or the future. Such a disaggregated conception of agency aims to allow for a better understanding of the interplay between reproductive and transformative dimensions of social action.

In my own search for agency (see chapter 4), I will try to emphasise the vision from within by highlighting the narratives of the people who lived through social transformations, while also shaping them and giving them meaning in the process. I will rely on Brujin et al. and their conception of reflexivity and its implication for how capabilities of actors shape their execution of agency. Emirbayer and Mische's concept will be helpful to analyse agency as a temporally embedded process of social engagement, "informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented towards the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and towards the present (as a capacity to contextualise past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment)" (1998: 963).

2.4.3. Translation and brokering as tools of agency

Social anthropologists (Geertz 1960, Mathews et al. 2017) have described the important role of middlemen or "cultural brokers" in deepening and stabilising interactions between different cultures and mediating in conflicts. Gordon Mathews et al. have stated that: "[t]he term 'cultural broker' is not much used by anthropologists but probably should be because in an age of globalization, the role has become important as never before" (2017: 151). In their study of African traders in Guangzhou, they find that African "cultural brokers" play a key role in the introduction of newcomers to China in such fields as business, visa regulation, food, cultural customs and romantic relations. Driessen (2019) has highlighted the important role Ethiopian brokers play within Ethio-China business relations and corruption practices in road

construction. She presents examples of Ethiopian brokers that gleefully engage in “guanxi” performances with Chinese clients (eating, drinking, visiting prostitutes) if they personally benefit from them. According to Driessen corrupt transactions in cross-cultural encounters are often progressive in producing a rapprochement.

Cultural brokering has been defined as “the act of bridging, linking, or mediating between groups or persons of different cultural backgrounds for the purpose of reducing conflict or producing change” (Jezewski and Sotnik in Mathews 2017: 228). Cultural brokers have been described as individuals with special capacities, because “[a]ctors who are positioned at the intersection of multiple temporal-relational contexts can develop greater capacities for creative and critical intervention” (Emirbayer & Mische 1998: 1007). They consider actors in brokerage positions as an exemplary instance of agentic activity. “Such social, political, and economic entrepreneurs seize opportunities for purposive intervention by manoeuvring back and forth between different social networks as well as cultural or social-psychological settings” (Emirbayer & Mische 1998: 1007). Hence, cultural brokers have resources for hypothetical rearrangement and comparative evaluation of possible trajectories of action.

Language and translation are key elements of cultural brokering, with a common language often being the most important tool for intercultural mediation. Wale Adebani (2017) has argued that translation often shows the flexibility, negotiability, resilience and innovation that has characterised everyday life in Africa since colonial times. Translators, or cultural brokers, were mediators throughout human history and especially within colonial relations. The practice of translations has had a central role within the political economy of colonial – and postcolonial – relations and therefore may be viewed as a practice, largely preoccupied by power imbalances between the colonisers and the colonised (translators). Souleymane Bachir Diagne (in Adebani 2017: 315) characterised the interpreter as one who can be “[...] a representative par excellence of the third space.”²⁶ And he reminds us that translation often happens in a field where certain languages have more weight and prestige than others and where bilingualism is most of the time not a choice but a necessity for people whose native languages do not count much in a certain context.

²⁶ The term “third space” was coined by Homi K. Bhabha (1994) to highlight spaces of hybridity where actors participate both in the world of the imperium and that of the colonised. Such intermediaries, like for example translators, have gained interest in colonial studies.

3. Methods and field research

Researchers in the past have called for more on-the-ground research, more attention to African actors and more consideration of individual agency within Africa-China relations (Strauss 2013, Mohan & Lampert 2013, Mohan et al. 2014, Driessen 2019). Social anthropology and ethnography in particular are well-placed to enrich the narratives about Africa-China relations by focussing on the experience of individuals. Ethnography is widely understood as the most important and most often used qualitative mode of inquiry on social and cultural conditions, with participant observation and interviewing as its most important tools (Eller 2016). There is no single definition of ethnography or uniform practice of the ethnographic method, nor should there be any because it responds and adapts to field research situations. As Julia C. Strauss has argued, ethnography has the capacity to redirect the power of interpretation about social transformations and cultural exchanges to those directly concerned by them:

“Quite unlike other approaches, ethnography systematically restores the value of individual experience, and takes seriously the notion that how individuals perceive the world, what they understand to be their choices, and how they express their hopes and fears are all things that matter, and matter before they explode into the realm of a journalistic event such as a strike or outbreak of violence.” (2013: 162)

3.1. Methods applied

Social anthropology was described as “the most intense and personal of the sciences” with the goal to “eat their food, perform their tasks, partake of their rituals” (Eller 2016: 36). Indeed, ethnography is to a large extent a subjective science. The researcher goes into the field and tries to build up a connection with his subjects of interest, with places, contexts and spaces. His own presence in the field and the experiences made will heavily influence the outcomes of his research.

According to Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1997), the main difference between social anthropology and other fields such as sociology, history, political science, religious and cultural studies are not the topics studied, but the distinctive method anthropologists employ, especially field work based on participant observation. They argue that “[...] our difference from other specialists in academic institutions is constructed not just on the premise that we are specialists in difference, but on specific methodology for uncovering and understanding that difference” (Gupta & Ferguson 1997: 2-3). While participant observation continues to be an important anthropological method, its uniqueness is ceasing, as “[...] talking to and living with the members of a community are increasingly taking their place alongside reading newspapers, analysing government documents, observing the activities of governing elites, and tracking the internal logic of transnational development agencies and corporations” (Gupta & Ferguson 1997: 37). It has become difficult to exactly define “the field” in an ever progressively globalised and interconnected world. The “field” now often exceeds a clearly defined geographical space, therefore demanding more multi-sited ethnographies (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). Hence, fieldwork has developed into a more flexible and diversified practice, well-suited to foster understanding of different places, people and their relations with each other. Given the fact that Africa-China relations are driven by geopolitical, economic, cultural as well as social entanglements, a flexible and diversified practice of field research seems promising to gain new insights.

The main methods applied within my field research were observation, participation and interviews. In many situations the use of these methods overlapped. The findings from the field were enriched by studying literature and media in the fields of Africa-China relations, Ethio-China relations and theories of agency, for the latter with a distinct focus on African agency within the Africa-China relations. Different locations, times and contexts required different methods. Research on the “China Market” in Addis Ababa (see chapter 4.3) in the beginning was characterised mainly through “deep hanging out”²⁷ and observation of the dynamics characterising the space. Later, it was followed by participant observation with Ethiopian merchants in their shops. My main goal throughout the field research was to produce a “thick description” (Geertz 1960) of the Ethiopian experience in everyday Ethio-China relations.

Unstructured and semi-structured interviews²⁸ represent the core element of my field research, while the latter was applied in most settings. This approach proved to be best adapted to the circumstances found in the field. Sometimes interviews were arranged, sometimes interview opportunities just emerged. Hence, the possible degree of preparation varied considerably. Most interviews were guided by a rough set of thematic complexes, like language, places, depth of interaction, emotions and motivations. My initial research sub questions (see chapter 1.3) were always present when engaging in a discussion with someone on the field, respectively when gathering information about Ethio-China interactions. Meanwhile, I adapted my set of questions continuously and tried to maintain “[...] radical openness to whatever form that conversation may take” (Brinkmann in Denzin 2018: 596). Drawing from my experience as a journalist, I knew that developing the right kind of questions is a process. Because the things that we come to study at first are often led by our preoccupations and they are not always the really important ones. Or as Judith Okely has written: “The anthropologist must be disponsible to what is out there. Forget the initial research plan, if exposed as inappropriate. Anthropologists must trust their inner judgement” (2012: 96).

3.2. Fieldwork and sample

3.2.1. Places of interaction

The encounters and observations presented in chapter 4 took place between 3rd of January and 14th of February 2019 in Addis Ababa, the capital in central Ethiopia, and in Dire Dawa, in the eastern part of the country, close to the border to Djibouti. The locations were selected before starting with the field research, based on literature research and Skype as well as WhatsApp calls and chats with local informants. Criteria for the selection of places of interest were the presence of infrastructure built or financed by China and the potential for observing interactions between Ethiopians and Chinese. I had originally planned to spend a lot of time in or around

²⁷ A term introduced by US anthropologist Renato Rosaldo (see Gupta & Ferguson 1997: 188). To spend a lot of time “hanging out” in a certain territory with a research question in mind, has proved to be a valuable technique in social anthropology in order to better understand the context and to build trust to informants.

²⁸ For a detailed overview regarding different forms of interviews in qualitative research, see Brinkmann (in Denzin 2018: 576 – 596). The author distinguishes three forms of more or less structured interviews: Relatively structured interviews with standardised ways of asking questions, which “[...]do not take advantage of the dialogical potentials for knowledge production that are inherent in human conversations” (579). Relatively unstructured interviews, where “[...] after the opening request for a narrative, the main role of the interviewer is to remain a listener” (579). Semi-structured interviews, where the “[...] interviewer has a greater say in focusing the conversation on issues he or she deems important in relation to the research project” (579).

Chinese industrial parks or on construction sites and had hoped to be able to do participatory observation there. But due to access constraints set up by Chinese companies (often with the help of the Ethiopian national police) this was rarely possible.

The research of Seth Cook et al. (2016) on the agri-food business in Addis Ababa was crucial to gain interest in the “China Market” and to later identify it as an important place for my field research. The decision to visit Dire Dawa was supported by the new Chinese built “Addis Ababa Djibouti Railway” that connects Addis Ababa with Djibouti and stops in Dire Dawa. Moreover, Dire Dawa will become the site of one of the biggest Chinese built industrial parks in Ethiopia, which was under construction during my stay. I had originally planned also to visit Djibouti, as it is the main entry point for cargo from China to Ethiopia and a place of much Chinese activity. After enquiries at the Djibouti embassy in Addis Ababa, it turned out that an over land trip from Addis Ababa to Djibouti by train was not possible due to visa restrictions.

3.2.2. Sample

Before leaving for Ethiopia I contacted two translators of which one became an important source of information later on. Moreover, the google group of the “Chinese in Africa/Africans in China Research Network”, managed by sociologist Yoon Jung Park, was very helpful in finding Ethiopian researchers as well as government officials for informal exchange on my research topic and expert interviews. My sampling strategy while on the ground, can probably best be described as “snowball sampling”²⁹, with people I got to know hooking me up with others that had something to say on my subject of interest. The “China Market” in Addis Ababa, as well as the studio of an artist in Dire Dawa turned out to be cubicles of interconnectedness, allowing me to meet people who were willing to share their experience and helping me to find answers to my research question.

One of the physical outcomes of my field research was a spread sheet with all the contacts (full name, e-mail, phone, occupation, place and context of encounter) taken from people I encountered and who had some experience with Chinese living and working in Ethiopia. This list eventually contained 47 contacts; 7 of them women, 40 men. I do not have the age of all the persons, but the majority was between 20 and 30 years old. From my list 34 individuals were Ethiopians, 11 were Chinese, one was Chinese-British and one Ethio-German.

I conducted three semi-structured expert interviews with people that were doing research on different aspects of Chinese involvement in Ethiopia. These served as background knowledge and helped me to better understand the context and the characteristics of Ethio-China relations in general. Out of the 11 Chinese people I directly interacted with, I conducted semi-structured and unstructured interviews with 3 of them. They helped me to better understand the motivations and living circumstances of Chinese expatriates and migrants in Ethiopia. However, as my research question is directed to the agency of Ethiopian people, I did not further elaborate on the agency of Chinese migrants in Ethiopia and the circumstances of their presence in Ethiopia. This of course would be very productive for a better understanding of Ethio-China relations, but is beyond the scope of this thesis.

²⁹ For a more elaborate definition and the techniques involved see Chaim Noy (2008). According to Noy, a sampling procedure may be defined as snowball sampling when the researcher accesses informants through contact information that is provided by other informants. Noy states that “[...] when viewed critically, this popular sampling method can generate a unique type of social knowledge – knowledge which is emergent, political and interactional” (2008:327).

For the further analysis of Ethiopian agency in the Ethio-China relations, I concentrated on a selection of my sample which was characterised by two main criteria:

- Ethiopian people who had some experience in directly interacting with Chinese people – mostly by working together with them.
- Ethiopian people that I interacted with in a way that our communication or time spent together was productive regarding my research question.

13 people qualified for these criteria, 12 men and one woman, comprising of one office worker, 4 freelancers (trade, translation, facilitation), 3 factory workers, one driver, one professor and three shop owners and businessmen. 8 of them engaged in an unstructured or semi-structured interview, of which all were at least partially transcribed. Four interviews were identified as core elements for my further analysis and were therefore fully transcribed (see annex) The duration and intensity of the interaction with the interviewees varied considerably. Some of them I just met once for the interview, while others I had met several times before and (or) after the interview. As I entered the field in a very open manner, I did not select my interlocutors by socio-demographic criteria, such as age, gender, ethnicity, religion or education. My only criteria applied were Ethiopian citizenship and experience in interacting with Chinese people, be it in Ethiopia or in China. For this thesis, I decided to concentrate on three different groups involved in Ethio-China relations: cultural brokers, workers and merchants on the China Market. Characterising individuals from these groups and their interactions with the Chinese in particular, seemed most beneficial to gain deeper insights about the diversity and differences of agency executed by Ethiopians within these relations.

Four of my Ethiopian informants turned out to be most crucial for this research project: One “cultural broker” (see chapter 4.1), who worked as a translator and facilitator for Chinese clients on a day to day basis. Two vendors on the “China Market” (see chapter 4.3) that I visited several times and who let me participate in their daily routine (which comprised of hanging around in their shops for hours, sometimes with very limited clients, sharing food and stories). And finally, one artist in Dire Dawa with a broad network to people involved in Ethio-China relations and whose studio functioned as an informal hang-out and meeting place.

3.3. Ethical considerations

It is unavoidable that the field researcher’s presence alters the environment in which this research takes place and hence also the outcomes of his inquiries. Researchers have to consider what impacts their actions have and what remains after one has left the field. In my research, I tried to strictly follow a “Do no harm” policy³⁰. Ethiopia at the time of my visit in the beginning of 2019 was experiencing major transformations. In April 2018 Aby Ahmed had emerged as the new prime minister of the country³¹ and his government had initiated steps towards more press freedom, democratisation and freedom of speech. This was all very recent, and my informants have lived through decades of repression and political persecution. I therefore had to consider that people may be afraid of speaking freely to a researcher and journalist about their experiences with Chinese people. Even more so, as the former Ethiopian government under prime minister Hailemariam Desalegn was known for its unconditional support for Chinese investments (Cheru 2016). Felix Horne, the responsible person for Ethiopia at Human Rights

³⁰ For an elaborated guideline for ethics in anthropological research, see “Principles of Professional Responsibility” of the American Anthropological Association (2012).

³¹ For a good summary of the political changes that took place in Ethiopia in 2018 see Nizar Manek (2018) and Fabian Urech (2019).

Watch, told me in December 2018 that until recently, looking into issues related to the Chinese was a “[...] no-go for anyone, given how sensitive the topic has been for the Ethiopian government” (authors e-mail correspondence on 12.12.2018 with Mr. Horne).

Throughout my field research I followed a standard of informed consent, meaning that I informed my conversational partners that I was researching for a MA thesis as well as for journalistic publications. I made it clear that their contribution was in any case voluntary. I gave them the chance to decide whether they wanted to be mentioned by their full name or by a pseudonym. For this thesis I decided to anonymise their names and refer to them by random first names. Researchers and journalists have to consider that not everybody might be conscious about how fast and far information can spread in times of widespread internet access and social media. Portrait pictures were only taken in mutual consent and where desired, I sent copies of the pictures to the person displayed. In general, I found Ethiopian people very open to talk about their experiences with the Chinese. Some explicitly mentioned that this had to do with the recent political changes in their country, which they said supported speaking openly.

Where translators were involved, I paid them a fee for their services at usual market price. In one case, a translator became an informant and friend. I am aware that paying has the potential to alter the relation to informants and to undermine aspects of friendship in fieldwork. On the other hand, a professional cooperation can deepen the exchange and trust between each other and lay the ground for a fruitful exchange. In my perception the latter was true for my relationship with Tesfaye (see chapter 4.1).

3.3.1. Positionality of the researcher

The positionality of the field researcher has long been a major concern in social anthropology. Victoria Reyes has argued that “[r]eflexivity – thinking about the ways in which our social positions, or positionality, shapes our entrance, interactions, and conversations within the field – is a core tenet in qualitative research” (2018: 222). Interrogating our own position as researchers remains an essential task of qualitative research, because they affect the empirical research in the field and the way we write up the data. This includes strategies of how we integrate our findings in theory and how we present it to potential readers.

In regards of my research question, I am an outsider. I am neither African nor Chinese and was not involved in the debate about Africa-China relations until I started my research project. Both my identities as a white, 41 years-old, male journalist and as a university student from Switzerland facilitated and complicated my research. For Ethiopians as well as for Chinese, I was clearly identifiable as someone from the West (European or American) and therefore as “the other”. I felt that especially young Ethiopian men were generally keen to interact with people from the West out of curiosity and interest or for their personal economic gains. Sometimes this was hard to differentiate, as in the case of a befriended artist in Dire Dawa, he was curious about my life, wanted to discuss politics and developments in Ethiopia with me and at the end profited economically from my presence when I bought one of his art works. Chinese young men, on the other hand, were generally harder to approach. There are several possible reasons for this: I do not speak Mandarin, or any other language spoken in China, while most Chinese I have met had no or very limited knowledge of English. The “West” was clearly identified by many Chinese in Ethiopia as being critical against China in general and China’s presence in Africa in particular. And being raised in a one-party autocratic state with very little freedom of press, a journalist and researcher may be identified as a source of trouble.

My own socio-economic background and my knowledge in three different languages (German, French, English) facilitated direct interactions with Ethiopians with a high school diploma or some degree of university education. I also found to have easy access to Ethiopian researchers and professors, who turned out to be generally open to share their knowledge with a researcher/journalist from Switzerland. On the other hand, the fact that I could not speak any

Amharic or any other Ethiopian language (apart from some basic formulas for simple everyday conversations) made direct interactions with Ethiopians with no or only basic formal education difficult, which is the case for many labourers in Chinese companies.

My own gender facilitated my access to men, who are generally more visible in Ethiopian public compared to women, but it made access to women more difficult (see also chapter 3.4.1). My origin and place of living surely preconditioned my perception of China's role in Africa and Ethiopia. With Swiss, European and American media being my main sources of information, I had more access to alarmist narratives about China's influence on the African continent, than to those hailing China's engagement as positively transformative. It is hard to deny that my research project and the fundamental research question were inspired by such narratives. Only after I started researching on the topic and after interacting with people concerned, other narratives started to emerge, and my perception on the topic became more multifaceted. The direct interaction with Ethiopians involved in Ethio-China relations as well as with Chinese business migrants fostered my empathy for my interlocutors and understanding for their motivations and actions. However, since my research was focused on the Ethiopian experience of Ethio-China relations and as I was interacting much more with Ethiopians than Chinese during my field trip, my perspective on the intercultural relations may have a certain "Ethio-bias". Finally, field research has clearly altered my own positionality on Africa-China and Ethio-China relations; a change maybe best described as an enforced reluctance towards simple explanations on a macro-scale and a higher curiosity for differentiated experiences on a micro-scale.

3.4. Limitations of research

3.4.1. Gender

Ethiopian women nowadays constitute large parts of the work force hired by Chinese companies, as I could observe in Chinese-led industrial parks, in Chinese run train stations and Chinese owned grocery stores. Ethiopian women also engage in intimate relations with Chinese men³² and become mothers of boys and girls which are half Ethiopian and half Chinese. Women also work as prostitutes for a Chinese clientele³³. Research about these different entanglements and the experiences made by Ethiopian women was important, but to my knowledge is so far inexistent. Mohan et al. (2014) have highlighted this gap and called for more research into woman's perspectives on Africa-China relations. My own research is heavily biased towards the experience of men and cannot contribute to closing the wide research gap in gender aspects of the Africa-China relations. I attribute the gender bias in my research partly to my own gender, which facilitated access to male informants, especially in the context of a largely patriarchal Ethiopian society. Men are more present in public space, most business owners, cultural brokers and workers I have met were men. However, I had interactions with Ethiopian female shop owners, specialised in Chinese products, train conductors in Chinese trains, civil engineers in industrial parks. Unfortunately, none of the encounters and conversations reached the depth to qualify for further analysis in this thesis.

³² One of my translators frequently showed me pictures of his Chinese friend's wedding invitation cards and smartphone videos of children's birthday parties from Ethio-Chinese couples. Marriages between Ethiopian women and Chinese men seem to be much more frequent than marriages between Ethiopian men and Chinese women.

³³ Residents in Debre Zeyit, close to the Chinese-led Eastern Industrial Zone, talked about irregular visits of Chinese men to certain bars for prostitution. Likewise, in Dire Dawa one bar was known for prostitution and regular visits from Chinese workers from construction sites in the region.

Additional time would have been needed to build trust in female informants. Hence, the female perspective on Chinese-Ethiopian relations and its differences to the male perspective maintains to be explored in further research.

3.4.2. Language

Successful field research is generally based on learning the language of the people of interest. Language not only opens a direct channel for communication, it also helps to understand ideas, concepts and realities often crucial to understanding a culture (Eller 2016). Many subtleties transmitted through a certain language can only hardly be translated and in the process the risk of losing meaning is constantly present. Felwine Sarr (2019) explicitly addresses the importance of African languages for the cultural identity of Africans and has argued that the rehabilitation of African languages in all domains of public life is crucial to regain an African identity beyond western post-colonial narratives. Language can function as a door to the soul and spirit of a people and contribute to the ethnographer's experience and understanding of everyday lives of the subjects of interest. My field research was complicated by several language barriers. I was able to speak English with younger, well-educated Ethiopians and in very few cases also with young Chinese business migrants. I used English as a lingua franca, which despite deficiencies due to lack of proficiency, is a powerful tool to create meaning in many contexts. But the fact that this is neither my native language nor that of my interlocutors must be taken into account when analysing and interpreting dialogues and interviews as there is considerable space for misunderstandings. The transcripts (see annex) partly reflect this, as there were situations where I could not fully understand my interlocutors.

Since I speak neither Amharic nor Chinese, I was partly dependent on translators. In Addis Ababa, I had access to professional translators. I worked with two translators for selected situations, one for the translation from Amharic into English, the other for the translation from Mandarin into English. In Dire Dawa I could rely on the help of trusted people. However, during the exchange between informant, translator and researcher, parts of the information can get lost or words can open misleading interpretational spaces. The danger of misinterpretation and false, unintentional completion of narrations and meanings is always present in ethnographic research. This is further amplified when language barriers exist. That said, it is the researcher's responsibility to triangulate data picked up from his interlocutors with other data and to substantiate his own understanding through theoretical and empirical evidence.

Language and communication are a fascinating aspect of Ethio-China relations which is only briefly addressed in my research. The emergence of thousands of Chinese business migrants has led to the creation of a new pidgin based on fragments of Mandarin, Amharic and English, with varying portions of each language, depending on the education and length of stay of Chinese migrants in Ethiopia, as well as Ethiopians' education and experience. This informal language was created in the process of intensified business relations between Ethiopians and Chinese. Today, it can be heard mainly on markets and construction sites and it ensures that basic tasks, such as buying food or directing workers, can be executed. Often this communication is also supported by technology, with translation apps on smartphones facilitating Ethio-Chinese understanding. More than once I observed that even Ethiopians were wondering how their fellow countrymen managed to communicate with the Chinese without a common formal language. The Ethio-Chinese communication and the pidgin created in the process is a gold mine for sociolinguists and language scholars that remains to be further explored.

3.4.3. Time

A typical anthropological fieldwork experience may take a year or more and ideally the social anthropologist has a chance to go back to the field, to grasp the dynamics of social and cultural changes (Eller 2016). The experience and systematic practice of participant observation to a

large extent defines the academic discipline of social anthropology. Bronislaw Malinowski's long-term ethnographic field work on the Trobriand Islands until today is featured in most study books on ethnography and his practice remains a key reference to many social anthropologists. Longer time frames allow for deeper immersion into spaces, events and day-to-day living with the people of interest. Even though I had already identified places and people of interest before going to the field, six weeks turned out to be very constraining to build deeper relationships to informants and to immerse in their everyday lives. First, one has to orient oneself and find out what are the most important subjects to look at and questions to ask. Second, it takes time to find out whose experiences, stories and occupations are most valuable for one's research. Third, when identified, people of interest are not always available to spend time together. Fourth, trust is built on spending time together, sharing meals or drinks and exchanging experiences. There is no doubt that, if I had had more time and more opportunities for participatory observation, the profundity of knowledge could have been deepened.

3.4.4. Space

Africa-China relations are by nature transcontinental, if not global. Business and family networks now span from China to Africa and the other way around with important links throughout the world. Research institutions, think tanks, diaspora communities, politicians, artists, business organisations, civil society groups and media throughout the world are involved in creating narratives about Africa-China relations. Africa-China studies therefore call for multi-sited ethnographies. My research was multi-sited in the sense that I moved between different places in Ethiopia and in and around Addis Ababa. But I am well aware that my research only covers a small part of the multi-sidedness of Ethio-China relations. More time and resources would be required to cover larger parts of the Chinese presence in Ethiopia and the people's response to it.

4. Searching for agency in Ethio-China relations

As introduced before, chapter 4 will heavily draw on my experiences during my field research in Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa from 3rd of January to 14th of February 2019. I will focus on three groups of people and activities: cultural brokers, workers and merchants on the “China Market”. My ethnographic accounts are stylistically separated into “vignettes”, reportage-like narrations of places and activities, and “short portraits”, focussing on people and their personal experiences. Most of the quotes are taken from the transcripts in the annex, while some are based on notes from my field research notebooks. At the end of every group, I will reflect on the narrations and draw some preliminary conclusions, which will later on inform the final conclusion in chapter 5.

4.1. The ‘connectors’ – cultural brokers and their aspirations

Vignette 3: “It goes all through that guy”

Dire Dawa, 21.01.2019, early afternoon: I meet Hachalu at the Alliance Française in Dire Dawa. A befriended artist with a residency at the Alliance has introduced me to him. We meet at his gallery and Hachalu is keen to tell me about his big dreams and his deep anger towards all the restrictions of Ethiopian society to achieve them. The 23-year-old man dropped out of university because of “family reasons”, as he says. Now he is struggling; he tries to find jobs, smokes a lot of weed or chews khat. His brother owns a company that rents cars and machinery to construction companies. As I mention my topic of interest, he becomes agitated and tells me about bad experiences he and his brother made when working together with the Chinese. They were cheated and lost a lot of money, to the point that his brother now refuses to work for Chinese clients at all. His frustration is not only directed at the Chinese, but also at so called “connecting experts”. In order to get new business contracts, they hired such experts to facilitate their interactions with Chinese companies.

“They are very active and they are very wanted and needed by Chinese people. The Ethiopian that speaks Chinese are the most beneficiary. It goes all through that guy, if you have some kind of..., everything goes through that guy. Even our company got jobs by this person.”

His brother initially paid “connecting experts” to establish contracts with Chinese construction companies. But the young man complained that they are neither loyal, nor liable. Once, they faced problems with their contractors and needed help from their middlemen who, however, had disappeared and was unreachable by phone. Others refused to transmit the money they had received from the Chinese

company for the rental services of his brother's company. I ask him about the loyalty of such "connecting experts" and he explains:

"[...] in my thinking they are loyal only for themselves. If he finds something to steal from you or to show some strange things, he will do it. So, you have to protect yourself. You have to always open your eyes when you meet this kind of person, you may lose everything."

Biruk the Huawei engineer with a linguistic mission

I got to know Biruk through a Swiss colleague working in Addis Ababa for the GIZ. She told me about a friend of hers who worked as a language teacher and spoke Chinese. After a couple of WhatsApp messages, we finally meet for a long discussion in my hotel. From his accounts, Biruk is somehow a language genius. He started studying French at the Alliance Française seven years ago, then joined German classes at the Goethe-Institute and in winter 2017 started to take Chinese classes in the Confucius Institute. His interest in Chinese was triggered through his work as a civil engineer for Huawei Technologies. His supervisors from China could barely speak English and no Amharic at all. As he says, he had to break down his English in order to be able to communicate with them. He realised that there is a dire need for Ethiopians who can speak Chinese and he sensed a new challenge to learn yet another language.

After his contract with Huawei ended, he searched for a language centre in Addis Ababa. He found a Confucius Institute at the Technical Vocational Education Training Center (TVET), an Ethiopian institution that is supported by the Chinese government. Biruk instantly enjoyed learning Chinese. It took him 14 months to pass B2 level. When we met, he teaches Amharic at a language school run by a friend of his and takes care of the Chinese students. Biruk says that Chinese people learn Amharic fast, faster than English. I ask Biruk about his experience with the Confucius Institute, as it is sometimes portrayed as China's main soft power entity to infiltrate countries with Chinese ideas, philosophies and politics³⁴.

"[...] here it's only language. But with the CI in my opinion they are not doing well to promote the language, also to teach the language. That's what I have noticed. I pushed the system to learn more out of it, but if you ask me how much students they make good Chinese speakers out of it, I would say none. Only for the ones who have the chance to go to China will speak good Chinese."

According to Biruk, there were only two classes for beginners at the TVET with a maximum of 15 people per class. The library, where Ethiopians could find books about Chinese culture, politics and philosophy, was mostly closed. Biruk describes the teachers as fairly unmotivated, even though they came as volunteers to teach in Ethiopia. As one of the reasons for this lack of motivation he sees the setting of these engagements. One of

³⁴ More than 40 colleges and universities in the USA have closed their Confucius Institutes amidst warnings from the FBI, State Department and members of congress (Peterson 2020).

the teachers had described to Biruk his life in Ethiopia like living in a prison, because they were not allowed to leave the TVET campus.

As I have frequently heard complaints of Ethiopians that worked together with the Chinese, I ask Biruk about his experiences with working together with them as an employee at Huawei and as a teacher in his own language school. At Huawei, some of his Chinese bosses frequently treated others without respect. However, he insists that he had not allowed them to do the same with him. He made sure that his work was properly done but therefore required his bosses to treat him respectfully. When required he would defend his point even against his Chinese superiors. He then comes up with a remarkable explanation of why Ethio-Chinese encounters in the working environment are often conflictual:

"The Chinese, if you work under them, it's very ruff how they act. But when you are equal or when you are their boss, its completely different. [...] My friends...., yeah that's something that really puzzled me. Before I knew my friends, my teachers at the ... university, they wouldn't talk to me. Before they knew who I am and if they can speak Chinese... First time I went there I was talking to them in English. They did not want to talk to me. That's the Chinese culture, something I don't really like. So I call them they did not talk to me. So the other day I went and in a conversation I spoke Chinese. So they were really surprised. So our relationship transformed quickly and dramatically. So now they really respect me. Now I am their teacher, our relation has turned upside down."

Biruk at that point talks about his first encounter with his Chinese teachers at the Confucius Institute who then became his Amharic students and friends. According to him, it very much points to the fact, that language and hierarchies are essential in Chinese culture and especially in business relations. His Ethiopian roommate works for a French consultancy company that regularly advises Chinese companies. As a consultant he is often in a superior position to his Chinese clientele and consequently they treat him with all respect and even invite him for dinners and pay for expenses.

Biruk has drawn his conclusions from his experience with Huawei: He does not want to work for a Chinese company again. The working environment is not tempting for him, even though as a civil engineer for Huawei he had earned 30'000 Birr per month (around 1000 USD/month), more than any of his friends from university and much more than the average Ethiopian. Still, he does not want to waste his time and resources working for a company that does not share the cultural values of cooperation and respect that he finds important. This does not mean that he will not engage with the Chinese anymore, but in a different context and with hierarchies reversed. For the future he wants to find motivated Chinese language teachers for his own language school in order to compete with the Confucius Institute. As he considers the performance of the latter as weak, he sees an opportunity to build up a genuine Ethiopian competitor. Meaning, an Ethiopian-lead language school that builds a linguistic bridge between the two cultures.

What is more, Biruk has applied for a Chinese scholarship, given from the Confucius Institute to top performing students. He had high scores and he is keen to go to China as soon as his request is granted permission. According to him, the scholarship includes travel costs and expenses in China for six to twelve months. He wants to stay as long as possible, he says.

"[...] here is something that I like about the Chinese: It's different, it's very, very different; something unique, the language, the culture, the food. I mean, since I was a kid, we get to see on the TV the European and American culture. But the Chinese culture... That's why I want to go to China and see how people live."

Tesfaye

getting close to the Chinese by the will of God

Chinese people often call him “the tall one”, because of his size and his slack posture. Tesfaye’s knowledge is broad, his arguments are thoughtful, at least most of the time, and his English is flawless. He lives together with his sister, the only sibling he has, in a rented apartment in Addis Ababa. He is 25 years old, engaged to be married and waiting for his fiancé, who still lives on the countryside, to join him in Addis Ababa. Tesfaye belongs to a new, tiny Ethiopian middle class, mainly based in Addis Ababa. He shops in malls in the Bole district and drinks coffee at places like “Golden Coffee Roastery”, an enormous cafe with marmoreal floors and large couches, following a nouveau-riche aesthetics. Like his parents, Tesfaye is a follower of Jehovah’s Witnesses. Every Sunday afternoon he meets his congregation in a church close to Meskal Flower, a 30 minutes’ drive from the city centre away, where the mass is bilingual, in English and in Chinese³⁵.

Tesfaye learned his Chinese from an American couple that worked as missionaries for Jehovah’s Witnesses. Their main goal was to spread the gospel to the growing number of Chinese migrants in Ethiopia. Tesfaye followed their class every Saturday from 9am to 6pm for four months. After the couple had left Ethiopia, he continued to spend four hours a day to learn the language by listening to music and watching videos, but most of all by going out and preaching and listening to the Chinese. He used their feedback to check whether what he was saying made sense to them. For two years he worked as a full-time missionary preaching to Chinese migrants all over Ethiopia. At the same time, he started to do graphic design jobs for Chinese clients.

Over the past four years, Tesfaye has established a network which now is his most valuable asset. Whenever I meet him, he carries his large Huawei phone and an external battery with him. These are his main working tools to stay in contact with his Chinese clients and search for new job opportunities. I became witness of his close ties to Chinese migrants, when I asked him to arrange interviews with Chinese entrepreneurs and a visit at one of the Chinese led industrial parks. He managed to introduce me to several Chinese and bring me into the Eastern Industry Zone, a Chinese industrial park which is normally off limits for Western journalists and researchers. From the way Tesfaye interacted with the Chinese we had met, it seemed that he had gained their trust.

His engagements with the Chinese are now manifold and have grown into a profitable freelance business. He works as a professional translator, facilitator and tour guide for Chinese clients. For example, he consults Chinese businessmen who want to establish a company in Ethiopia. He helps them with their paperwork, translates government documents, negotiates with the Ethiopian officials and processes authorisations. Moreover, he facilitates and translates within job trainings. He also translates at court, when Chinese become victims of Ethiopian criminals or Ethiopians get cheated by Chinese. As he has to swear an oath to tell the truth, this comes with risks and therefore extra pay for the translator.

Another source of income is the growing number of Chinese tourists. Tesfaye now often guides Chinese tour groups through his city. For many, Addis Ababa is just a hub to reach other African countries or to fly back to China. They often stay just for one or two nights, which gives Tesfaye enough time to introduce them to an Ethiopian diner and a coffee

³⁵

I was there on a Sunday afternoon and met a dozen Ethiopians and one Chinese woman who seemed to be well integrated. I was told that, normally, there are more Chinese.

ceremony. If they stay longer, he takes them for a 5-day “southern nations tour”. They visit tribes, such as the Mursi or the Hamar, in order to experience “authentic” indigenous Ethiopian culture.³⁶

Chinese friends sometimes call Tesfaye when they have problems in their relationships with Ethiopian wives. Communication between husband and wife is often difficult, as a common language is missing. Tesfaye not only translates but also uses his knowledge from the bible and his moral standards to advise them for a more harmonious relationship. A Chinese friend of him proposed to open an agency, helping Chinese men to find Ethiopian woman (according to him and my own observation, it is very rare that Chinese women are engaged with Ethiopian men). He refused that offer.

In 2015, when he started to establish himself as a professional translator, there were only few Chinese-speaking Ethiopians in Addis Ababa. Soon after starting, he created his own WeChat group to connect translators and to share experiences and job offers. Later, he merged his group with someone else's. Now, they are over 200 translators offering their services to Chinese. According to Tesfaye, some group members even translate certain Chinese dialects. Another WeChat forum counts 276 members, in which translators directly connect with Chinese to find work. Communication is in English and in Chinese. I ask him about how he selects job offerings.

“I don't only choose work by seeing the salary. And once, they told me they will give me 30'000 to 50'000 Ethiopian Birr for month. So, they told me that I will also have a training in China, so I will go to China, have a pocket money, 8 months, two months of vacation and I will come back. The guy insisted very much. And at that time, I was in the full-time preaching activity, I haven't finished my plan, so I didn't accept it. Even if I was, I wouldn't have accepted it, because it limits the amount of contacts you will have. You will be only in the company; you will be only in the factory. You don't have any chance to go out and meet more people.”

With some of his clients he has worked for over four years now. And some of them he explicitly considers as friends. They invite him for Chinese dinners and they share personal and private stories. To illustrate this, Tesfaye recounts an incident where he showed pictures of his fiancé to a Chinese friend. He proposed that Tesfaye should consider him as a big brother and introduce him to his fiancé, in order that he could give her “Hong bao”, a red envelope containing money for the bride. A cultural gesture of Chinese people to show respect and kinship.

I confront him with my impression that the success of Ethio-China relations often depends on “cultural brokers” or “connecting experts” like him. I also tell him about my conversation with Hachalu and that he told me about his bad experiences with “connecting experts” (see page 51). I suggested that acting as a cultural broker is linked to the exercise of power and that cultural brokers can take advantage of their position.

“The translator has a big power, as he speaks both languages. And everything he says will be taken as a reference. And the thing is, the translators are somehow also pushed by the Chinese. And when he has the personality, he can also push the Chinese, since he speaks the language, they will be in a position to respect him. As a translator that's what I noticed. I don't accept the Chinese to push the Ethiopian people and I don't like when the Ethiopians become more lazy. I also don't like it. I try to appear as a human there. Not as an Ethiopian, not as a Chinese, but as a human. So that's a thing they have in common obviously. [...] So, sometimes the translator wants to be liked by the Chinese, you know he sometimes tries to flatter with the

³⁶ As Tesfaye told me, Chinese tourists often come with wads of banknotes to pay 5 or 10 Ethiopian Birr for every picture taken. Apparently, this is the “Africa” many Chinese want to show to their relatives back home. Tesfaye did not see anything condemnable about this practice. Both sides profit, he said.

Chinese and be on the Chinese side, thinking he will get more advantage. So, in the beginning the Chinese might like him, but when the time comes, no, you are off the game. Because the Ethiopians will no longer listen to what he is saying, because they know he is not the right person. But you have to be firm, a man of action in the middle. Otherwise you will be a puppet for the Chinese.”

In his account, the translator becomes a “man of action in the middle”, a self-definition of a cultural broker that very much emphasises the agency as well as the in-betweenness this role implies. Through his embeddedness in two cultures, the cultural broker has the power to shape and reshape the relations according to his own moral standards. In Tesfaye’s understanding, he should follow humanistic ideals and not take sides with cultures due to his origins. Even when paid by the Chinese, he has the duty and power to broker better conditions for the Ethiopian partners or employees, if the Chinese don’t treat them fair enough. On the other hand, if he sees that Ethiopian workers willingly hurt the performance of their employer without comprehensible reasons, he should take sides for the Chinese, uninfluenced by his own cultural background. Some of his clients know his personality and therefore would wisely decide for which jobs they would hire him and for which they would prefer someone else, he tells me. As Tesfaye admits, he sometimes willingly and actively interferes in situations which have the potential to escalate.

“And sometimes, as I told you, I have to water down some translations not to offend people. The Ethiopians might use the wrong words and the Chinese might use the wrong words. I don’t translate literally, I just simply translate what they want to say or the meaning that will convey. So, for example if they say you are stupid (laughter), I would say that you are not understanding the situation. You know just in a nice way. That I do purposely, I don’t want to be the person that puts gas on the fire. So sometimes I do that, having in mind to have peace.”

In such cases, Tesfaye uses his cultural understanding and language skills to transform messages and meanings. Translation and brokering become acts of performance, mediation and peace building. His understanding of brokering implies facilitating an intercultural dialogue, be it in the business world or in personal relationships. Tesfaye’s conception of translation shows similarities of Antoine Berman’s understanding of the discipline: “The essence of translation is to be an opening, a dialogue, a crossbreeding, a decentering. Translation is ‘a putting in touch with’, or it is nothing” (in Adebawwi 2017: 308).

Efrem living the “Chinese dream”

Efrem picks me up at the hotel with his old, dented Toyota. We drive around Bole district while he drops off a couple of documents. At one point, we stop at a two-story residential building with a parking lot in front, where he lives together with four friends. It is modest from a Swiss perspective, but still much more than most (young) Ethiopians own. He takes me to “Kategna”, probably the most upmarket, traditional Ethiopian restaurant I have ever been to. People from nearby banks, insurance companies, trading companies and other service providers come here for lunch. We eat a huge plate of injera with different sauces, accompanied by Coca Cola. Efrem insists to invite me; it seems that he can afford his pleasure to show a foreigner his city from its best side. After lunch, we go to the stylish “Tomocca” café close by to continue our conversation. We drink a ‘macchiato’, an espresso from a heavy Italian coffee machine, topped with foamed milk.

Efrem is 25 years old; he is small and bursting with self-confidence. He wears a white shirt, jeans and black leather shoes. On his right wrist hangs a golden watch. According to him a ‘Cartier’ that he bought for 900 US dollars in China. He comes from a trading family. His father owns a shop in Piassa, the enormous market area in Addis Ababa’s old centre, with thousands of vendors nowadays mostly selling import goods from Asia, like shoes, clothes, electronics and furniture. His father was his best teacher, Efrem says, and entrepreneurship was in his blood. His eyes light up whenever he speaks of “business”. Every few minutes he talks about a different entrepreneurial project or idea; from gemstone trading, to online sales, textiles and building materials.

Efrem studied in China for three and a half years, first in Fujian, then in Guangzhou. He now lives in China most of the time. Every three months he comes back to Addis Ababa for a few days to help his father and promote his own business, which currently mainly consists of importing Chinese ceramics for construction in Ethiopia. He says that his business partner now spends one million US dollars per year to import ceramics from China. Efrem takes 15 percent as a commission fee. When he is in China, he sometimes organizes trips to manufacturers and factories for family members and friends from Ethiopia. He recounts one trip with two of his uncles. Within 12 days they had travelled 8 cities in order to visit different companies, mainly from the garment sector, to invest 500’000 US dollars for import. I ask him about his initial decision to go and study in China.

“Like I told you, my sister went to USA. When we get older that time, I don't like US or European countries. Because if I were to go there, I can't do my business. What I wanted to experience for my family is buying, selling, trading business. Not like salary business. So, my sister, she graduates her masters in the US, she comes back and she told me she wants to take me to the US. But I didn't accept. I said, no, I want to go to China because I study and at the same time, I can help my family and I can import anything. And I want to experience high rise buildings. Like I told you, I studied architecture. So, even my family, they cry, you know, I didn't tell them when I forced my scholarship and when I get the visa, I went home and said: I'm going to China next week for a scholarship.”

Efrem did not study Chinese at one of the two Confucius Institutes in Addis Ababa and he was not offered one of the scholarships sponsored by the Chinese government. His use of the term “scholarship” is therefore misleading. What he is referring to is a certain contingent of African students that are allowed to study at Chinese universities. He paid his flight and tuition fee by himself. During his studies in architecture at Addis Ababa university, some of his friends were already studying in China. Hence, he knew some

people there and investigated about his chances. According to him, it was easy to enrol at a Chinese university. He completed his application to go to China in three weeks.³⁷

Efrem says that the number of Ethiopians at Chinese universities has increased considerably in recent years. He therefore turned this demand into a "business". After arriving in Fujian, he had to wait for a month until he could start with his studies. He was bored and came up with the idea to post an offer on Facebook, offering his help to Ethiopians interested to enrol at his university, the Fujian Agriculture and Forestry University. According to him, hundreds have contacted him and finally he brought 20 of them to China, each one paying him 1000 US dollars for his service. At the same time, he received a ten percent commission on the tuition fee from the university. Efrem financed his studies mainly through facilitating other Ethiopians journey to China. At the time we meet, he is too busy with other business activities. If someone is interested, he now redirects him or her to professional agents and asks for a commission.

After one year in Fujian, Efrem moved to the South China normal university in Guangzhou, mainly because the city, with its large markets and important port, is much better suited for his business activities. At the time of our conversation there were around 20 Ethiopians studying at his university, besides people from Uganda, Zambia and South Africa. When talking about his experience living together with fellow students in Guangzhou and working with Chinese business partners in Addis Ababa, there is an ambivalence that I found in many discussions with well-educated Ethiopians who work together with Chinese partners and clients. Efrem shows respect for the Chinese work ethic and the determination to be economically successful. At the same time he laments their lack of empathy and recounts racist experiences. However, he explains Chinese xenophobia and unfriendliness with the lack of a common language and the fear towards unknown strangers. When asked about real friendship, he considers "ten to twenty" as "personal friends", out of hundreds of Chinese "friends" on social media.

"They are good, I really like them. They have good culture; they have good culture. But the culture of only working is what I like from them. Personality and relationships, that's not good. You know, they have some racism. I think they are all afraid. But life is life. If they love you tonight, everything is easy."

Efrem is still convinced that he can learn a lot from being in China and that some of their technological advantages could hugely benefit his home country. He makes the example of WeChat. For everything related to China, he uses the app as virtual wallet. He has connected several bank accounts and receives direct payments through the app. Moreover, he uses WeChat to buy flight tickets, to find hotels, to book taxis and special packages and to top up his mobile phone. He says that he is inspired by WeChat and the giant online shop "Alibaba" and its founder Jack Ma. He envisions to have his own Ethiopian online shop in the future.

But even though he fully embraces the technological and entrepreneurial advantages of China, he does not consider a career there. "No, I am done. I don't want to live there anymore", he says. His apartment contract in Guangzhou will expire in a few months and after that he will only frequently travel to China to visit factories and business partners. Efrem identifies himself as an Ethiopian businessman. He wants to step in the shoes of his

³⁷ Efrem repeatedly mentioned a good friend of the family who works for the government. He was supportive about Efrem's plan to go to China. It is possible that he facilitated the paperwork for Efrem in order to get the visa and approvals required. A trader has told me before that specialized agencies with offices in Addis Ababa and several cities in China exist which facilitate paperwork for journeys to China.

father and to be successful in Ethiopia. For that purpose, he wants to profit as much as possible from his experiences and contacts in China. For him, as for most Ethiopians I got to know who had been in China, the fear of brain drain seemed to be largely unfounded.

4.1.1. Preliminary conclusions

Cultural brokering has been described in anthropology as an act of bridging, linking and mediating between groups and persons of different cultural background to reduce conflict or foster social change (Mathews et al. 2017). This description perfectly fits Tesfaye. Through his own socialisation in Ethiopia, his proficiency in languages (Amharic, English, Chinese), through his interest in and understanding of the Chinese culture as well as his organising and networking skills, he is ideally suited to broker between Chinese and Ethiopian cultural contexts. These are precious tools to execute agency within the Ethio-China relations and capacities for creative and critical intervention. The same is true for Biruk and Efrem, maybe in slightly mitigated ways, since the brokering itself is not at the core of their activities but a side effect of their engagement with Chinese language, universities, teachers and businessmen. However, they all share a remarkable exercise of agency towards Chinese actors and have figured out ways to exercise agency to follow their aspirations for the future. The demand for their services and the high salaries provide them with a remarkable degree of freedom and agency over their own life.

These young men are at the “[...] intersection of multiple temporal-relational contexts [and] can develop greater capacities for creative and critical intervention” (Emirbayer & Mische 1998: 1007). Such features typically characterise cultural brokers. Their capacities for creative and critical intervention are enlarged through their privileged social background and higher education in the past; their recently obtained language skills and experience in interacting with Chinese people and their culture and their aspirations for self-fulfilment, profit and a good life in the future. The three cultural brokers presented in this chapter “[...] seize opportunities for purposive intervention by manoeuvring back and forth between different social networks as well as cultural or social-psychological settings” (Emirbayer & Mische 1998: 1007). It is this flexibility to move between different settings and context as well as their capacity for purposive interventions which provide these actors with an astonishing degree of agency in their personal Ethio-China relations.

Money, motivations and aspirations

The cultural brokers presented in this chapter belong to a privileged group of well-educated young people in Addis Ababa, who earn much more than most Ethiopians. Tesfaye sometimes earns as much as 50’000 Ethiopian Birr per month (about 1420 USD / month) when helping Chinese businessmen or -women establishing their company. For usual translation services he demands 20’000 Ethiopian Birr per month (about 570 USD / month) and would not accept jobs paid lower than this. This is much more than average entry-level salaries in Ethiopia, which range from 35 USD to 40 USD per month (Gelan 2018) and roughly four times what a driver for a Chinese company earns.

Yet, all of these high salaries don't seem to be the only motivation for their engagement with the Chinese. “I don't only choose work by seeing the salary”, Tesfaye said. He even refused a lucrative job offer with trainings in China, including pocket money and promises for a high salary, as he gave preference to his duties as a missionary for Jehovah’s Witnesses³⁸. Moreover,

³⁸ Religion plays a crucial role in most Ethiopians lives, as it does in many African countries. Mathews et al. (2017) described how churches and mosques are important places of gathering for African migrants in Guangzhou and sometimes preference is given to religious matters over business activities. This seems to be hard to understand for many Chinese people.

he stressed that he wants to keep his abilities “to go out and meet more people” and to enlarge his network of Chinese contacts.

Efrem, on the other hand, belongs to a group of young Ethiopians who no longer see their best future prospects in the USA or in Europe, but in China. He lives “the Chinese dream” (Mathews et al. 2017: 29) and profits from his experiences and the knowledge he gained in China to fulfil his dream of becoming a successful businessman in Ethiopia. China functions for young and well-educated Ethiopians nowadays as an imaginary space for their self-fulfilment. Rather than going to western universities for education, which has been the norm for decades for African students that could afford it, China has become a viable alternative. Other than Tesfaye and Biruk, Efrem not only acts as a cultural broker in Ethiopia, mainly serving Chinese to get along in a yet unknown environment, but also in China, to introduce Ethiopians to China, for example, by organising scholarships at Chinese universities or tours for factory visits. His brokering activities are very much bidirectional.

Efrem shows a remarkable determination to succeed as a businessman despite difficulties as an African migrant in China. He had to orient himself in an unknown environment, he had to build up social and economic relations from scratch and he had to endure incidents of racism. These challenges very much reminded me of what some of the individual Chinese migrants have told me about their starts in Ethiopia. They, too, were willing to endure hardships to make money and leverage their socio-economic status. They, too, were willing to abstain from the comfort of living around likeminded people with similar socialization and cultural backgrounds. And they, too, had experienced racism and were confronted with prejudices and othering based on their physical features. Miriam Driessen (2016) has described how Chinese migrants regard Ethiopia as providing opportunities for economic success and to gain social status in a way they could not back in China. While they often consider themselves to bring development and wealth to Ethiopians, many are disappointed by the harsh realities on the ground and the ‘ungrateful’ Ethiopians. Efrem shares a lot of experiences with independent Chinese migrants in Ethiopia and exercises the same remarkable degree of agency in shaping his own live towards a better future.

Language

The stories of Tesfaye, Biruk and Efrem show the central role language plays in the Ethio-China relations. Language is the tool which facilitates the intercultural understanding between Ethiopians and Chinese. These three young men have, out of various reasons, decided to learn the Chinese language in order to enhance their agency within the Ethio-China relations. But in the case of Tesfaye and Biruk, the economic opportunities are only part of the explanation for their motivation to learn Chinese. Tesfaye originally learned the language to work as a missionary for Jehovah’s Witnesses. He saw the language as a tool to convince Chinese migrants to follow the path of his congregation. Only after he realised that his language skills (combined with his personality and social skills) would allow to earn a living as an independent translator and facilitator. The language became an important amplifier of his agency in his personal Ethio-China relations. Biruk, on the other hand, started to learn Chinese only after his first experience in working for a Chinese company. That experience in fact helped him to realise the great demand Chinese enterprises have for cultural brokers to be successful in their business ventures. But still, it was mainly his curiosity and his love for languages that led him to enrol in the Confucius Institute. What is more, he has a curiosity for something “very, very different; something unique, the language, the culture, the food”. Even though he would be perfectly suited to work for a Chinese company as civil engineer, translator or facilitator, he deliberately chooses to follow his passion for languages. He uses his language skills to fulfil his personal dream of teaching languages (Amharic to Chinese and Chinese to Ethiopians), rather than using them in order to make the most profit possible.

For Efreem, on the other hand, the Chinese language is simply a tool to follow his business ventures. Other than Tesfaye and Biruk, he has no urge to ameliorate his Chinese language skills beyond what is necessary for his business relations. He also does not directly use his language skills to earn a living but rather uses them indirectly for his intercontinental business activities. While the others seem to have an empathic relationship to the Chinese language, Efreem's seems to be purely functional.

Hierarchies

Biruk's account shows us how language has the potential to dramatically alter hierarchies and to produce agency of Ethiopian actors within Ethio-China relations. His relationship "transformed quickly and dramatically" as soon as he started to address Chinese people in their language. Biruk says that "[i]f they are above you or don't know you, they will really act not in a good way". Interestingly, the original lack of respect towards Biruk from the side of his teachers does not seem to be driven by racist motivations, as one might think. Much more, it was the lack of a common language and the impossibility for communication that motivated them to other themselves from Biruk and to alienate the Ethiopians in general as the "others". While negative, racialised stereotypes exist within Africa-China relations on both sides (see Mohan et al. 2014; Park 2013), we should be careful to not misinterpret a lack of openness and respect as racism. It may be due to the important role of hierarchies, which of course can be intertwined with racism and other intersectional discrimination but does not inherently have to.

Interestingly, Biruk's personal agency and very pragmatic approach towards working with the Chinese flows into his geopolitical views on Ethio-Chinese relations too. He requests his government to "[...] use Chinese engagement for the countries interest" and to "[...] stand fierce and demand more quality" within the Ethio-Chinese relations. Ethiopia should be aware that China "[...] wants to get something out of it". He holds no bad feelings against the Chinese presence in his country, but he demands his government to take more agency to shape these relations to the peoples benefit.

"I mean they are here, so how do we get most out of it? For example: They do roads, they do buildings. Its good! But what's the quality? And debt, there is a lot of debt. How can we minimize our debt and maximise the quality? But to push them out, I think it would be a foolish thing to do. To get the most out of it should be our goal. I am not against that they are here."

4.2. The workers – annihilated between global capitalism and weak regulation

Vignette 4:

Work together and win together

Debre Zeyit, 9.01.2019, early afternoon: As we approach the “Eastern Industry Zone” (EIZ)³⁹ with our minivan, a big LED-screen at the entry gate shows Chinese letters meaning: “China–Ethiopia: Good relations. Work together and win together.” It is difficult to speak directly with Ethiopian workers employed within Chinese-led industrial parks. An Ethiopian translator, who regularly works with journalists from the USA and Europe, told me most Chinese companies don’t allow journalist or researchers to enter the parks anymore, since negative reporting about working conditions has appeared in the media. Therefore, we wait in front of the parks entry gate and ask workers for interviews after their shifts when they leave the park and wait for minibuses to bring them to their homes, mainly in Debre Zeyit or in direct vicinity to the park to keep travel expenses low and to save time.

Tilahun, a man in his early forties, works for the gypsum producing company «Hongua Li». According to him, four Chinese and around 120 Ethiopians work in the company. He and his three colleagues, who are also present during the interview, are not satisfied with their working conditions and the treatment by the Chinese employers. One complaint is directed to health issues. Tilahun suffers from irritation of the eyes and mucosa. The workers have repeatedly asked for protective clothing, gloves and eye protection to protect themselves from the dust as part of the gypsum production. While their employer always agreed on better protection, he never provided them with the demanded equipment. According to Tilahun, the workers informed the local government about the working conditions, but so far did not get any support by them.

Another complaint is directed to the low payment. Tilahun’s monthly income is between 2000 and 2500 Ethiopian Birr, depending on the amount of gypsum produced⁴⁰. This is around 70 to 80 USD per month and more than workers in other industrial park earn (Barret & Baumann-Pauly 2019), but only slightly exceeds the 57 USD per month defined as global poverty line by the UN⁴¹. According to the workers, the income is not high enough to pay for rent, school fees for the kids, food and support of family members. During our

³⁹ The Chinese-led “Eastern Industry Zone” (EIZ) is in the Oromo region, 32 km south of Addis Ababa. The EIZ is one of the oldest Chinese industrial parks in the country. As of 2016 64 Chinese enterprises were active in the EIZ, producing textiles, garments, footwear, construction materials, auto parts and food (Fei 2018). They provided jobs for approximately 7000 workers.

⁴⁰ The Ethiopian law does not prescribe minimum wages through statute (ILO, n.d.).

⁴¹ The internationally agreed poverty line is set at an income of less than 1.90 USD a day (UN 2020). This line is also used by the UN to measure progress regarding the Sustainable Development Goals.

interview Tilahun highlights the dependence on his Chinese employers and the fact that he does not have any alternatives to his current work.

„If I like it or not, as long as I don't have any other option, I am damned to work here to survive. It does not matter how arduous our work is.“

Fasil, another worker interviewed in front of the EIZ, works for a Chinese carpentry company. He moved to Debre Zeyit from another province in search of a better income and more job opportunities. But he is disappointed by his current job and living situation. The young man shares a small room with three other colleagues, as he cannot afford to rent his own room. He talks in an angry note about his experiences with Chinese employers:

"I first worked for another Chinese company. Now I work as a mechanic and machine operator. For my previous job I received 840 Birr per month. I couldn't even pay the rent and the school fees. The Chinese enslave us because they realise that we have no other options. They don't care if you work overtime, they just look after their advantage. We would like to return home in time, but they only look at themselves. If I complain, they will fire me. I haven't found a better job, so I'm still working with the Chinese."

For the workers in the EIZ I have spoken to, the relation to their Chinese employer is characterised by a perceived power imbalance, dependence and a feeling of injustice. My findings support evidence that salaries are an important source of perceived injustice within Ethiopian workers (Fei 2018) and that violation of international labour rights occur regularly (Barrett & Baumann-Pauly 2019).

When talking to workers employed by Chinese companies in the EIZ and residents of Debre Zeyit, it became apparent that Chinese are rarely seen in town. Social interactions for most Chinese business migrants are to a high degree limited to their peers within the industrial parks, which are generally equipped with all major facilities (convenient stores, canteens, sports grounds, residential areas) to live inside the park. When asked about their interaction and communication with the Chinese, all Ethiopian workers I talked to did not have any interactions and communications beyond work related issues.

Abdu disillusioned and struggling

Abdu works as a driver for the “China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation” (CCECC), on a construction site 95 kilometres from Dire Dawa, close to the border to Djibouti. The company builds a new 55 kilometres long road as one of the projects to better connect Ethiopia with the port of Djibouti⁴². Abdu started to work for CCECC 15 months ago. He followed high school until 10th grade, obtained a driving licence and started working as a driver. They invited several young men and put their skills to the test to choose the best ones.

“When I go there, I had a driving licence, I registered as a driver. But most of my friends registered as labourers. Our expectation was, it is nice money. Because in Ethiopia, especially in Dire Dawa, you can't get 6000 in one time. But the job maybe very very hard and difficult. But when you get 6000 in one time it means something in Dire Dawa. So, I had a positive view back then. It may be good for me and an experience for me. So, I took it as the best chance for me.”

As he explains, the driver's main job is to be ready at any time, to drive the Chinese engineers and managers to Dire Dawa to buy tools, goods or to get money from the bank. Sometimes he makes the same trip three times in a day. He does not have a fixed working schedule and his vacancies depends on the company's needs. He just follows their commands, he says, and if they want him to stay for 10 or 15 days on site, he does it. Abdu earns 6000 Ethiopian birr per month (around 200 USD) without extra pay for overtime work. Colleagues who were hired as daily labourers earn the same (200 Ethiopian birr per day). After a test period of three months he received a fixed contract. While CCECC can let him off anytime, his salary will be held back as soon as he announces to leave.

For his work, he lives in a camp on the construction site together with workers and daily labourers. He describes the landscape resembling a desert, characterised by a very hot climate and with snakes and scorpions found frequently. In peak times there are around 600 Ethiopian workers on the construction site. 10 to 17 workers live together in a shack of around 30 square metres. They all sleep on foam mats directly laid on the floor. The roof is made of corrugated iron sheets and he complains that it is very hot and unhealthy to live there⁴³.

Abdu, moreover, complains about the quality of the food provided by the employer and says that toilets and sanitary facilities are not clean and unsafe to use. Apparently, workers frequently fall ill because of lacking hygiene and the harsh living conditions. He complains about bacterial diseases caused by unclean and cramped living conditions.

⁴² Djibouti is Ethiopia's only access to the sea. 95 percent of the import products for Ethiopia come through the port of Djibouti (Mulugeta 2018). CCECC currently builds a 42 square kilometers large industrial park in the outskirts of Dire Dawa along the Chinese built and financed train line connecting Addis Ababa with Djibouti (Ethiopian IPDC Dire Dawa Industrial Park Concept Plan 2017). The “IPDC Dire Dawa Industrial Park” is the closest manufacturing facility to the Djibouti port and therefore a crucial element in China's “Belt & Road Initiative”.

⁴³ One day, together with an urban planner of the city administration, I tried to enter finished parts of the Ethiopian IPDC Dire Dawa Industrial Park close to Dire Dawa built by CCECC. On the way we crossed miserable looking and crowded camps for Ethiopian workers which fit Abdus descriptions. I did not have a chance to visit the camp, or speak with the workers, as we were chased away by an officer of the federal police, which is safeguarding most of the big Chinese construction sites.

Malaria was common among workers, as well as water poisoning. First aid on the construction site was poor and he often takes people who got sick or had an accident to a hospital in Dire Dawa. According to Abdu, the company pays for medical treatment in the case of work accidents but not if someone gets sick. Moreover, the employer would not grant workers time to cure in case of sickness. He says he constantly gets sick and has therefore lost a lot of weight. When we meet, he looks tired, he sweats a lot and has red eyes. I ask him about how difficult the interaction with his Chinese bosses on the construction site is.

"They are complicated, they are complicated. We don't know the decision, we don't know how they do. Even if they eat food, they don't invite you. In Ethiopia it's a very common thing to eat together. They don't eat with anybody, they eat alone. They do what they want, they are complicated. We don't know what to do, we just do our job. It's very very poor to communicate with them and to live with them. To socialize with them it's very hard, we don't understand them, they don't understand us. I may insult them, they may insult me. I don't know what they do. I'm just doing my job."

Abdu says that Chinese managers and engineers live in a separated compound with houses he considers as "villas". The skilled Ethiopian labourers, mainly engineers, have their own compound with better facilities than the workers, but not at the same standard as the Chinese. Following Abdu's explanations, there seems to be a distinct 3-step hierarchy with the Chinese at the top and the unskilled labourers at the bottom. He considers the skilled Ethiopian labourers as "integrated" with the Chinese. Few of them speak Chinese but most of them speak English, which seems to facilitate the communication with the Chinese. Often the Chinese give their commands for the workers through the skilled Ethiopian labourers. "The Chinese pressurise them to pressurise us", says Abdu. "Even if we are Ethiopians, we are different." In his view, the skilled Ethiopian workers are more loyal to the Chinese than to the Ethiopian workers, a loyalty bought through the salaries they earn and through more linguistic possibilities to directly communicate with their employers.

While he was attracted by the salary in the beginning, he now feels it is unsatisfying considering the harsh working and living conditions and the sacrifices he has to make, like being away from his family and friends and compromising on his health. He says he is looking for another job but cannot find one. Many colleagues who started to work with him have already quit their job. He preferred his former job as a driver for an Ethiopian construction company where he earned 5000 Ethiopian birr per month. He says he would now be satisfied with an even lower salary, if he had a chance to work in Dire Dawa. "I look for jobs all time. But in Ethiopia you can't get jobs easily. I am just trying."

4.2.1. Preliminary conclusions

Tilahun, Fasil and Abdu all belong to a group of Ethiopian men that saw Chinese employers as a chance to ameliorate their living standards. Most of the workers and daily labourers I have spoken to during my field research (for an exception see end of this chapter) complained about their working situation. The hardship of working conditions (missing protection gear, health issues, over time, living conditions on construction sites) were major concerns. Moreover, most workers considered their salaries not even high enough to pay for basic needs, such as food, education for children and rents. These men often have large families with unemployed family members and according to cultural habits and tradition, they are obliged to take care of their kinship (Fei 2018). Interestingly, Abdu, who earned a salary much higher than the labourers at the Eastern Industry Zone (EIZ), complained similarly about his engagement for a Chinese company. While salaries are important, they seem only to partly explain the dissatisfaction with the work conditions provided by Chinese companies.

The accounts of the workers support a growing body of evidence that exploitative work regimes are frequent in Chinese companies operating in Ethiopia. Fei (2018) conducted interviews with 204 Ethiopian workers in the EIZ. She found that most of them worked seven days a week with average daily working hours between 6 hours to a maximum of 15 hours per day, depending on the work sector. Low payment was considered the main challenge across all sectors in the EIZ. Monthly wages ranged between 1200 Birr (53 USD) and 2200 Birr (97 USD), with lower payments in textile companies and higher salaries in auto and industrial materials companies.

A recent report by the NYU Stern Center for Business and Human Rights (Barret & Baumann-Pauly 2019) has shed light on the working practice in the Hawassa Industrial Park, a vast and still only partly filled facility built by Chinese companies about 225 kilometres south of Addis Ababa, which currently employs 25,000 workers. Researcher found that basis wages are around 26 USD per month and living conditions of most employees were precarious, with the majority of workers being young women from poor farming families.

As the Ethiopian government does not enforce a national minimum wage, the salaries are in line with Ethiopian law. Exploitative work regimes don't seem to be a specificity of Chinese engagement in Ethiopia, but rather a fundamental problem of labour policies and weak enforcement of international regulations to protect worker's rights by the International Labour Organization (ILO). The "race to the bottom" to achieve the lowest production costs possible is not a particular characteristic of China's "going out" strategy and oversee ventures. Rather, it is an outcome of capitalism with its inherent logic of competition and a progressively globalised world with intercontinental supply chains. However, these are the dynamics that underlie the rapid emergence of more and more Chinese-led industrial parks in Ethiopia.

Hierarchies

Ethiopian workers' freedom to co-determine their work conditions seems to be very low and the room for agency is compromised by a strong power imbalance between Chinese managers and engineers and Ethiopian labourers. Even though the cooperation of Chinese and Ethiopian workforce is hailed on billboards in front of industrial parks, it is obvious from the workers' accounts that this cooperation is strongly defined by hierarchies. During my field research I spoke with workers at the EIZ, employees at the Addis Ababa-Djibouti train line and drivers working for Chinese construction sites and they confirmed that all management positions in their companies were held by Chinese staff. A Mc Kinsey study (Jayaram et al. 2017) found that 89 percent of employees in Chinese companies operating in eight African countries, including Ethiopia, were Africans. But very few of them seem to work in management positions. As Ding Fei (2018) has shown, even in the case of skilled Ethiopians working for Chinese high-tech companies and occupying posts in the mid-level management, the company structure is designed in a way that no Chinese will ever have to work directly under an Ethiopian manager.

Translators and university graduates (in my case mainly engineers) seem to sometimes uphold a special position between the Ethiopian workforce and the Chinese management. Abdu describes a 3-step hierarchy with the Chinese at the top, "integrated", skilled Ethiopians in the middle and workers and daily labourers at the bottom. The separation between skilled workers and unskilled is partly defined by education and degrees but also by language. All the workers I have spoken with could neither speak English nor Chinese, while all skilled workers (mainly civil engineers) had at least some knowledge of English. Even if many Chinese migrants present in Ethiopia had no education in English and mostly no or very little experience in speaking it, it seemed to facilitate work interaction and allowed for skilled Ethiopians without Chinese language skills to operate as supervisors for the Ethiopian workforce and as mediator between them and the Chinese management. This superiority and their role as translator of commands in Abdu' case led to a loss of solidarity within the Ethiopians (see also vignette on page 51). "Even if we are Ethiopians, we are different", Abdu states. Othering in that case not only occurs between Ethiopians and Chinese, but also occurs between the different hierarchies Ethiopians belong to,

fostered by the organisation system set up by the Chinese employer. If that is a particularly Chinese phenomenon one may doubt, but as work satisfaction in the cases of my inquiry are very low, it tends to be accentuated.

Work cultures and quality of interactions

The enormous devotion and determination for work and financial success that characterises many Chinese entrepreneurs in Africa (see also French 2015) seems to be rather alienating and obscure for Ethiopians. Their identity, to a large extent, is characterised by community, family and a very strong role of religion in everyday life. “The Chinese, they don't fear god”, is a complaint I have often heard during my field research. While most Ethiopians I have spoken with admire the enormous speed and efficiency of Chinese companies, they are generally alienated by their working culture.

Abdu for example highlights that it is a very common thing to eat together in Ethiopia and he is obscured that Chinese “[...] they don't eat with anybody, they eat alone”. The alienation is further spurred by the language gap, which complicates any meaningful communication. Fei et al. (2018) found that Ethiopian workers highlighted language and communication with their Chinese bosses and colleagues as one of the most challenging parts of their work. Cultural misunderstandings seem to commonly occur. Paul Barret & Dorothée Baumann-Pauly have found that “[s]ome foreign managers from South and East Asia shout at workers to get their attention. But Ethiopians consider shouting as offensive. This and other cultural clashes increase employee attrition rates” (2019: 13). They concluded that Chinese managers are often not prepared of the fact that for many Ethiopians, working in an industrial park is their first experience with industrialized labour organisation. Women interviewed by the researchers did not understand why they would be disciplined for lateness, absenteeism, or chatting with other workers at the expense of completing their daily tasks. These kinds of misunderstandings, complicated by the lack of a common language, create tension, lead to frustration and reinforce the feeling of Ethiopians of having no agency at all within work relations. Tang Xiaoyang & Janet Eom have argued that “[...] conflicting perceptions of work ethics between Chinese and Africans are [...] caused by evolving notions of time that accompany a transition from pre-capitalist manner of production to that of industrial capitalism” (2019: 461). Based on field studies in Tanzania and Ethiopia the authors show that when a society industrialises, its notions of work ethics and time perception change. Hence, as Ethiopians` and Chinese` experience of intercultural industrial work grows over time, misunderstandings and frustrations may decrease.

Nearly all Ethiopian workers I have talked to did not have any interactions and communications beyond work related issues. They described work as their sole chance to interact directly with Chinese migrants and to experience “Chinese culture” through them. As this interaction is often perceived as unjust and exploitative due to working conditions and low payment, the workers` relation towards the Chinese migrant community is heavily burdened by their experiences within work regimes. Ding Fei et al. (2018) found that on a table with ten different statements regarding the working experience in the EIZ, the statement “You often socialize with Chinese colleagues beyond working hours” was the one with the lowest rating at all (1.8 on a scale from 0-5). As the authors explain, this partly has to do with intentional provisions from Chinese employers to limit the scale of interaction of their compatriots with Ethiopian employees. One textile company intentionally limited communication with locals, and restricted conversation to work related issues because the boss believed that it was a good way to ensure efficiency and avoid potential conflicts (Fei 2018). If Chinese are forcibly restricted by their bosses to limit interactions with their Ethiopian colleagues, cultural exchange and understanding of the others` manners is difficult to achieve.

Othring and alienating therefore occurs on both sides. Fasil, for example, says about his Chinese employers: “They don't care if you work overtime, they just look after their own

advantage”. Abdu says: “It’s very poor to communicate with them and to live with them to socialise with them is very hard. We don’t understand them, they don’t understand us.” Othering and alienating for workers seem to be a form to distance themselves from a perceived other that is exploitative as well as culturally awkward. This is probably further strengthened by some Chinese management’s efforts to limit the exchange and communication between Chinese and Ethiopians to a minimum and only to work-related affairs.

Structural constraints over personal agency

The acceptance of exploitative workplace regimes seems to be fuelled by a perceived lack of options. These workers seem to a large part to be stripped of from their agency because of missing options to change their own situation and the structures they are embedded in. This lack of options was due to structural limitations, characterised by a high unemployment rate⁴⁴, an abundance of unskilled and low-skilled labourers, a rarely developed manufacturing industry and a high degree of rural migrants searching for jobs in factories around urban centres. Tilahun explicitly articulates his hopelessness and lack of agency when he states that he is “damned to work here to survive”. His and other workers’ struggles in the past and in the present leave very little room for hopes of a better future. If agency is associated with “[...] selfhood, motivation, will, purposiveness, intentionality, choice, initiative, freedom and creativity” (Emirbayer & Mische 1998: 962) very few of these characteristics seem to be encouraged by the working situations my interlocutors found themselves in.

Chances for purposeful and directed acting towards changing the structure workers were entrenched in turned out to be very limited. Tilahun and his colleagues have tried to overcome structural limitations by asking for better protective gear and even claiming their rights in front of the authorities. But in the end, they accepted that neither their employers nor the government would follow their demands. In that case the structural environment of exploitation was maintained and reproduced due to the feeling of powerlessness rather than transformed through human agency. In the case of the labourers met, the iterational element (Emirbayer & Mische 1998) of agency was predominant. By reactivating past patterns of thoughts (absence of alternatives, powerlessness of the individual and absolute power of the structures) and action (struggling to survive), they provide stability and order to social circumstances and through that, help to sustain identities and institutions over time. The “projective element” of agency, referring to the imaginative generation of possible future trajectories, seemed to be very low developed in the case of the labourers. Their position was characterised by a lack of capabilities to reconfigure structures of thoughts and actions in relation to their hopes, fears and desires for the future.

Exceptions

While workers complaints about working conditions and salaries are very frequent, not all share them. According to Fei et al. (2018), working conditions in the EIZ vary significantly and cannot be generalised. Some companies offer lunch to their workers, while others do not; some offer shuttle services to bring workers from their homes to the EIZ, while others do not take any responsibility for the transportation at all. A young Ethiopian man in his early twenties, who did not have a family yet and who worked as a carpenter for setting up Chinese industrial parks, told

⁴⁴ Youth employment presents a particular challenge to Ethiopia. According to the ILO, the country’s population aged between 0-29 years constituted about 73% of the total population in 2016. Approximately three million young enter the labour force every year. In 2018 official urban unemployment was at 6.5%, while national unemployment rate was at 4.5%. The ILO states that “[t]he population growth coupled with limited economic opportunities and livelihood options for Ethiopian youth has resulted in significant increase in the rate and magnitude of out-migration to different countries in the last few years”(ILO 2018).

me that he is more than happy about his salary and the working conditions provided by the company. He wants to continue working for his Chinese employer as long as possible. And even Tilahun and his colleagues, while complaining about the miserable working conditions provided by their current employer, would not hesitate to work for the Chinese shoe manufacturer “Huajian”, also present in the EIZ, because of its reputation for providing workers with many benefits. Huajian is one of the biggest Chinese garment producers in Ethiopia, with over 7000 employees in 2018 and international clients such as Guess and Ivanka Trumps fashion line (Marsh n.d.). According to the men, Huajian offers their employees fair salaries, free food, healthcare and transportation. This is remarkable, since the company itself has been criticised for its bad working conditions and strict management for a long time (see also Marsh n.d.).

Chinese companies therefore might follow a learning curve regarding work conditions and respect of workers’ rights during their activities in Ethiopia. While setting up a company in often chaotic and challenging surroundings, work ethics may play a minor role. Even more so when they are not enforced by the Ethiopian government. Only after setting up a stable business with thousands of workers, constant revenues and considerable media attention, companies may start to invest in their human resources. Currently, Huajian develops its own enormous industrial park in the outskirts of Addis Ababa. Unfortunately, access and direct contacts with workers were denied to me.

4.3. The merchants on the “China Market” – learn from them and compete

Vignette 5:

Low-communication-business-making on the China Market

Addis Ababa, 11.02.2019, early morning: Ethiopian salesmen, mostly young and male, stand in front of simple stalls made of wood and corrugated iron, lined up on both sides of a narrow cobblestone street. In front of them are piles of onions, tomatoes, radish and Chinese cabbage. Occasionally, a farmer drives a few goats through the motorcade that slowly pushes its way between the market stalls. Sweaty labourers push heavily loaded wheelbarrows or carry large cardboard boxes over their heads. The shelves of the market stands hold many vegetables and spices not found in traditional Ethiopian cuisine, such as Chinese cabbage, cucumbers, soya, coriander, eggplant and ginger. It is obvious (and was later confirmed to me by the vendors) that the offer is almost exclusively aimed at an Asian clientele of which the majority was Chinese.

The “China Market” is situated along Ruanda street and was therefore known as “Ruanda Market” for many years. Some also knew it by the name of “Japan Market” because of the Japanese embassy in its direct vicinity. However, during my stay most of the Ethiopians I spoke with called the market simply “China Market” due to its majority of Chinese customers. A linguistic turn which reflects the fact that the Chinese community has become an integral part of the urban fabric of Addis Ababa.

A vegetable seller in his early twenties tells me that his customers are mainly chefs or professional buyers from Chinese companies. They buy in bulk for their cafeterias, as Chinese vegetables and other products are not available on most other markets. As I observe, he greets his Chinese customers with a “Ni

hao" and thanks them with a "Xièxiè". The sparse communication between them takes place in a mixture of Chinese, Amharic and English – an Ethio-Chinese pidgin that yet has to be named – and is accompanied by gestures, indicating which products the buyers are interested in. The vendor knows the names of his products in Chinese and is able to communicate with his customers in simple ways. It turns out that this is enough for business reasons. He tells me that he took up the Chinese words by listening to his clients, repeating their phrases and a translation app on his smart phone. However, he is not interested in Chinese language beyond its use for selling his products and neither is he interested in the lives of his Chinese customers. He explains this partly with reciprocity: "They only come to the market to buy their products and then go back immediately. Very few have time for a chat."

The market scenes repeat themselves: Chinese customers, mostly male, drive up with their Ethiopian chauffeurs. Often a cigarette in their mouth, they get out, look at the goods expertly and either exchange a few words with the salesman in Chinese or English or through an Ethiopian translator who does the talking. Afterwards, the driver or an assistant takes several plastic bags full of vegetables and throws them onto the loading area of a pick-up truck or in the trunk of a minivan. Some are newcomers and seem to be totally dependent on their Ethiopian company, while others act more independently and seem to know the Ethiopian vendors.

A young Chinese man with pale skin, a white Baseball cap and sportswear, holds a large smartphone with a golden frame. He is non-stop on his phone, chatting in Chinese. Bashar, his driver, tells me that Mr. Li is a purchaser for a Chinese company and regularly comes here to buy food. He is followed by a young Ethiopian man that works as his translator. Mr. Li advises him in Chinese which products from the stands he wants to buy and his translator deals with the Ethiopian vendors. In this case, there is no direct communication between the Chinese buyer and the Ethiopian sellers. As I will learn in the coming days, it is the sort of low-communication-business-making that characterises much of the Ethio-China interactions on the China Market.

Mr. Li looks lost between the stacks of vegetables and overwhelmed by the bustling dynamic of the market. It is as if he is searching for hold in his huge smart phone and some protection by talking in Chinese to his business colleagues on the other end of the line. His Ethiopian translator, on the other hand, seems to be on top of the game. He negotiates, communicates and handles the situation in an eloquent manner. It is a kind of dependency from Chinese business migrants towards their Ethiopian brokers and facilitators that I have observed several times. The vendors pack everything into plastic bags and throw it on the van which follows Mr. Li along the tiny street between the food stands. On the loading space of the van his driver and an assistant sort everything out. Bashar tells me that they come from Gonder every other week to buy vegetables, bags of rice and tools for a road construction site in that area. He has worked for Mr. Li and the Chinese company for four year and earns 7000 birr per month (around 230 USD). Better than a

government job, he says. "It's the best option I have". When I approach Mr. Li to ask him some questions in English he turns away.

Jack⁴⁵ is another Chinese client on the China Market and he is quite different from Mr. Li. He is talkative and curious. He speaks English well and is happy to tell me about his life in Ethiopia. He comes here almost every day to shop for a big construction site. He is responsible for the culinary wellbeing of the 300 Chinese workers and engineers at the construction site for the Skylight Hotel across from Bole airport⁴⁶. Jack has been shopping at the Chinese Market for months. He does not need a translator, negotiates with the vendors himself and casually chats and laughs with them.

The central piece of the market are its outdoor vegetable market stalls. Around them, a small "Chinatown" has emerged in recent years. More than a dozen Chinese restaurants can now be found in the area as well as many Chinese-owned small grocery stores. According to shop owners, Chinese migrants have only settled here for around a decade. Chinese characters decorate their shop windows, red lanterns with golden characters hang in the entrances. Puffing Chinese stroll with plastic bags between the shelves in which they find many of the products from home: Fish and soy sauces in all variations, dried mushrooms, cashew nuts, rice noodles and noodle soups, Chinese liquors and cigarettes, all imported directly from China.

Most Chinese I talked to during my field research did not like the Ethiopian cuisine. Their cooking culture is sacred to them and they see neither a necessity nor a profit in complementing their cuisine with Ethiopian dishes. Larger companies and construction sites have their own canteens and Chinese cooks (or Ethiopian cooks who were introduced to Asian cuisine, as I experienced myself in one Korean restaurant along the China Market). Food for Chinese migrants is an important means to connect with each other and strengthen the bonds among the Diaspora community (Cook et al. 2016). The preference of the Chinese community in Addis Ababa for their own food has led to a great demand for Chinese products that transformed the former "Ruanda Market" into the current "China Market".

The majority of the Chinese shop owners are not highly educated, they have various work backgrounds and come from different Chinese provinces (Jiatong 2019). The fierce competition in their home country led them to migrate to Ethiopia and to try to establish their business on the China Market. Chinese migrants in the agri-food sector are mostly independent actors with little or no support by the Chinese government. "They serve no larger agenda and are simply trying to eke out a living and make a profit under often arduous circumstances" (Cook et al. 2016: 66). Newcomers on

⁴⁵ Many Chinese use second westernised or christianised names to introduce themselves to Europeans and Americans, but often also to Africans.

⁴⁶ Skylight Hotel is the most exclusive five-star hotel in Addis Ababa. It opened in January 2019 and soon after hosted many African heads of state during the annual conference of the African Union. It was built by AVIC, a Chinese engineering and construction company, is run by a Chinese management and hosts the largest Chinese restaurant in Ethiopia (Daily South Africa 2019).

the China Market rely on their social networks, known as *guanxi* in Mandarin, which can take the form of kinship relations, regional affinities, friendships or work colleagues. But as Chinese shop and restaurant owners compete for the same clientele, solidarity and helpfulness within the Chinese migrant community did not seem to be very distinct. As one older Chinese man who had migrated to Ethiopia to help his daughter run a vegetable shop at the China Market told me: "I don't have many friends here. It is all about buying and selling. Most Chinese live in their camps. I am mostly in my shop and only have few friends."

Interestingly, a newcomer on the market can easily be misled regarding the ownership of the shops. The Chinese characters on the shopfronts, the red lanterns, the Chinese billboards and products make it all easy to believe that the whole area is now owned by Chinese. And after my first strolls on the market soon after my arrival in Addis Ababa, that was exactly the impression I had. I thought it is 'their' place and was convinced having found a perfect example of an "ethnic economy"⁴⁷, whereby Chinese sellers only cater for a Chinese clientele. In fact, many shops and nearly all restaurants are managed by Chinese owners and are run by Ethiopian Cooks, shop assistants and waiters, often women. But it was only after I started to enter the shops and talked to Ethiopians at the cashier's desk that I realised, that some of them were owned by Ethiopians. Their shops looked visually inseparable to me from those of the Chinese, with Chinese letters on the shop-windows and the decorations. As I shall learn in the coming days, Ethiopians are well represented on the "China Market", not only with vegetable stands in the centre, but grocery stores all around it as well.

⁴⁷ Ethnic economies often secure labour, contracts and investments for members of the same ethnic group. They can function as a market for culturally defined goods, a pool of low wage labour and source for start-up capital. Mohan et al. found that features of ethnic economies exist in several African cities, but that "[t]he practice of ethnic economic networks does not seem to be as prevalent as it is often assumed and it was more a case of decision-making based on logics of profit and loss" (2014: 85).

Tahir

the tofu seller

Tahir is 46 years old; his forehead is bald and his teeth are slightly brown from chewing khat. He has a waggish smile and relaxed attitude regarding his work. As a father of three, he lives in Wolo Seffer in central Addis Ababa in a modest house. Every morning he wakes up at 5.30 a.m., walks to his shop for 90 minutes and only stops to pray in a chapel on the way. He likes walking, dogs and horses (he has dozens of pictures on them on his smartphone). He owns a Tofu shop at the China Market. The centre piece of his business is a large refrigerator with three types of tofu: traditional, skinny and smoked tofu. He buys it from Chinese producers around Addis Ababa. He himself likes to eat tofu, Chinese noodles, broccoli and cabbage and he explains me, how he sometimes cooks tofu with chilli and onions for himself. The Chinese producer of the tofu has five employees, produces fresh tofu every morning and brings it to Tahir's shop around 8am. He then sells it to Chinese restaurants, canteens and individual clients. Many are regular customers, but beyond their purchase history he does not know much about them. For some customers, he writes their purchases in his notebook and they pay their duties every second week. I take it as a sign of trust.

His shop exclusively wears Chinese signs indicating that he sells tofu and that he caters mainly for a Chinese clientele. In the afternoon, he often goes to one of the restaurants nearby to drink St. Georges beer and chat with friends. He then puts a sign on his door with his phone number and runs to his shop as soon as a Chinese customer calls him. As we sit in a street side coffee close to his shop, Tahir can distinguish between Chinese, Koreans and Japanese. He says the Koreans came here to build hospitals and provide doctors while the Japanese build schools and provided teachers. Only the Chinese, he says, they came solely to make business. Nevertheless, he is very fond of the Chinese presence on the market. "We make a lot of profit with the Chinese here", he says.

Like other Ethiopian shop owners that I had met and who sell Chinese products, Tahir had been to China himself. He had originally worked for a Chinese trader and followed him on a trip to Guangzhou for 25 days. They had toured different markets to check for products to import and compare prices. But Tahir had been put off by the cheap quality of many products. Finally, his employer imported a container full of mountain bikes and sold them for 150 USD per piece in Addis Ababa, only to find out that the demand for such a product was very limited and that most of the bikes broke after two to three months because of the rough roads and the poor quality of the bikes. After that, Tahir started his own tofu business.

John

compete and collaborate

John is 33 years old and the owner of one of the cleanest and best organised 'Chinese shops' on the China Market. He first started working here for a Chinese trader. Three years ago, he took over his shop and started his own business with Chinese products. The margins on them are much higher than on Ethiopian products, he says. He has been working in this area for six years and says that it changed a lot. In his memory, four years ago, there were only two Chinese shops and no Chinese restaurants at all. Still he thinks that the peak is already over, as many big infrastructure projects in Ethiopia (the Light Rail in the capital and the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway) are completed by now. He is not the only one who told me that since a year, business is slowly declining. He rarely is in contact with Chinese shop owners around him. "They don't speak to you because they don't want to expose their business to others", he says.

His shop is around 15 square metres big, filled with shelves full of Chinese products. He imports products like peanuts, noodle soups, pitch black, dried mushroom, sesame oil and glass noodles directly from China. Frazzles of Chinese enter the shop from a Chinese restaurant next door. He has adapted his opening hours to his Chinese competitors and runs his shop from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., 6 days a week. Except for pork, he likes Chinese food and from time to time goes to a Chinese restaurant with his wife.

I spend several mornings and afternoons in John's shop. His customers are solely Asian, but from all walks of life. Some are regular customers, like a construction tycoon who has been in Ethiopia for seven years and is a fluent Amharic speaker. He greets John with a 'shoulder kiss', the common Ethiopian welcome ritual between men, and they chat casually. Another regular customer is a woman in her forties from Shanghai who speaks a perfect English and buys food in big quantities for a textile company. She jokes with John and they laugh a lot. However, most of the customers visit the shop for the first time. Often, they drop in, ask for prices of different products and then rush away.

It is not unusual that they don't greet the shopkeeper or his brothers who help him out in the store. In fact, the customers sometimes act as if John did not exist at all. One morning, a Chinese woman comes into the shop without saying hello and sweeps between the shelves like a hurricane. She wants to know how much this and that costs, finds the prices too high and goes out again without saying goodbye. I am a bit perplexed and I ask John if he does not feel offended if customers behave like that. He says that this is not unusual, just the Chinese way of doing things. He takes it with humour and does not feel offended. He is here to serve his Chinese customers, he explains, therefore he treats them with respect, even if they don't show him any respect at all. After all, he makes good money with them, he explains.

"Competition is very fierce", John says. "You can't allow yourself to make any mistakes". Sometimes the people who rush through his shop are business owners themselves who check prices to later offer the most competitive prices. That is why John does not put a price tag on his products anymore, he does not want to make it too easy for them to undercut his prices. The purchasers for big companies often want to make personal profits by buying products for sub-market prices and keep the gains for themselves, John explains. He always knows the prices of the other shops. Sometimes he sells his products below the purchase price just to attract new customers. Later, when he gained their trust, he makes up for the losses with selling them other products for prices above the market standard.

To my initial surprise, John is able to have a basic conversation in Chinese with his clients and knows the Chinese names of most of his products. With his business partners in China, who mostly don't speak English, he usually communicates through the smart phone app "WeChat", the Chinese counterpart to "WhatsApp". Thanks to the ingenious translation function, he can negotiate with his partners even when a common language is missing. During my time spent in his shop, he would sometimes send a voice message in English and receive an answer in Chinese, which he then translated into English. WeChat also allows him to pay his bills in China. When he orders products in China, the vendors take pictures of every single item they pack for shipping and send them to John for confirmation.

One morning, I meet Yang Yang, a 27-years old Chinese from Hangzhou who moved to Ethiopia three years ago together with his mother. He wears a white sport jacket, black jeans, Nike sneakers and black horn-rimmed glasses. His look is awakened, he speaks a basic English but no Amharic. If he does not instantly know a word, he looks it up on his smartphone, which is always at hand. He left China out of need, he says, because it has become too competitive without any perspective to build a career, to marry or to buy a house in the future. He went for Ethiopia because one of his uncles produces furniture in Addis Ababa. He offered to help Yang Yang to get along in the country. So far, he has not left Addis Ababa and did not see anything else of Ethiopia. "I am too busy, I work all the time", he says. In his rare spare time he stays at home most of the time because he considers the environment too dangerous. "There are people walking around with guns", he says, even though nothing ever happened to him personally⁴⁸.

For the last two years, Yang Yang has been working as a business facilitator for John and he also advises another Ethiopian business owner. John is convinced that it is better to work directly with a Chinese facilitator instead of an Ethiopian one, even though there are now many Ethiopians in Guangzhou who offer their services to facilitate export/import to Ethiopia. He considers Yang Yang as his security so as not to be cheated on and entrusted him three million Ethiopian birr (around 85'000 USD) to purchase goods in China for his shop.

In October 2018, John travelled to China himself for the first time. He stayed in Guangzhou with a friend for ten days and visited manufacturers of food products and compared prices of wholesale companies. Thereafter, he took a train to Hangzhou to meet Yang Yang, who showed him around the region, including Shanghai. The whole trip had cost him around 80'000 Ethiopian birr (around 2300 USD), he says. The outcome of the trip was a container filled with food products, which he would later ship to Djibouti. By bypassing a middleman in China, he would increase the margin on his products. However, in the beginning of February, John is still waiting for his goods to be cleared at the border from Djibouti to Ethiopia. He says for the cargo to arrive, it can take between two weeks and three months. Apparently, it is not unusual that officials hold back goods. He is nervous, as some of the food products will soon pass their expiry date. It seems that John is willing to take big risks in order to undercut the prices of his Chinese competitors on the China Market.

⁴⁸ The notion of Africa being a dangerous continent is widespread among Chinese migrants in Africa (see also Mohan et al. 2014; Jiatong 2019). One evening after eating in a Chinese restaurant at the China Market, a manager from Huawei, whom I got to know during diner, insisted that his driver brings me back to the hotel. "This is Africa! You can't just walk home; they will kill you", he said. However, among expats and travellers, Addis Ababa is considered one of the safer capitals on the African continent. Personally, I never made any bad experiences walking back to my hotel at night.

4.3.1. Preliminary conclusions

There are currently up to 40'000 Chinese business migrants in Ethiopia (Cook et al. 2016). Many came with state-backed or private construction companies for huge infrastructure projects, such as train lines, telecommunication networks, roads, stadiums and office buildings. These migrants do not only work in Ethiopia, they also live there. As most migrant communities in the world, they want to eat their food, want to buy their products, want to smoke their cigarettes and drink their liquor. Hence, this demand for Chinese products has created new business opportunities for Chinese and Ethiopian entrepreneurs the like, as observed on the China Market.

Giles Mohan et al. (2014) have argued that the focus on China as the sole driver of Africa-China relationships repeats long standing ways of portraying Africans. In Western narratives, Africa often appears at the whim of external forces, based on the assumption that Africans are not capable to fashion their own destiny. My observations on the China Market support claims for a more relational understanding of interactions between Africans and Chinese. The Ethiopian entrepreneurs I have met purposefully and actively change the structure and condition they are entrenched in. They show a continuous dialectic engagement with their environment and a constant process of negotiation between their own situation and the structures they are entrenched in. Tahir and John both profit from the knowledge they have gained while working for Chinese migrants to later set up their own business. Nowadays, they actively take risks (investment of capital, business trips to China, etc.) and show a lot of creativity (prices schemes to foster a client's illusion of making the best deal) to compete with Chinese traders and vendors. The "practical-evaluative element" of agency (Emirbayer & Mische 1998: 971) seems to be very pronounced in these particular cases. Tahir and John make practical and normative judgements among alternative trajectories of action in response to the emerging demands, dilemmas and ambiguities of presently evolving situations. For example, John constantly adapts his business to new demands of his clients and tries to leverage his margin on products by engaging with a Chinese broker and go for purchase trips to China himself. If agency is defined as a human capacity which allows for many different paths to be taken as a reaction to certain social realities (Bruijn et al. 2007), the Ethiopian shop owners on the China Market exercise a remarkable degree of agency to make Ethio-China relations work for their own benefit.

Legal protection to foster agency

Tahir deals with tofu, one of the most typical Chinese products of all. According to his accounts, he makes profits that are much higher than what he could make with Ethiopian products. The main skills for entering the Chinese market he learned from his former Chinese boss. He then used his creativity, his inventiveness and reflexivity to make the Chinese presence in his country profitable to him. He learned from his former Chinese employer until the point where this knowledge empowered him to open his own shop catering to the Chinese. The Chinese tofu producer needs someone to distribute its product on local markets. As Tahirs' activities are crucial for their business, a reciprocity in interest and dependence has evolved between the Chinese producer and the Ethiopian vendor.

This reciprocity is further deepened by legislation, as the law basically reserves small retail for Ethiopian businessmen and women. Ethiopian regulations do not allow foreigners to engage in wholesaling and retailing activities (Cook et al. 2016) and the government requires Chinese aiming to start a business in Ethiopia to register and invest between 100,000 and 200,000 USD (Ethiopian Investment Commission 2017). Tahir told me that "[t]he Ethiopian government doesn't grant them a license. And it doesn't work here without it. That's Ethiopian work, I'm a citizen." But as I could observe during my strolls over the China Market, this does not mean that Chinese migrants do not run shops themselves. They often cooperate with Ethiopians who are eligible to buy the necessary license to open a grocery store. In most shops run by Chinese, this cooperation is represented by a license with a photo of an Ethiopian man or woman hanging on

the wall behind the counter. The person on the picture usually has nothing to do with the business, except that he or she was paid for the license by the Chinese operators. My translator told me that a reason why many Chinese men want to marry an Ethiopian woman soon after their arrival is to get access to a shop licence through their wives (see also Cook et al. 2016). Some Ethiopian shop owners I have spoken to, including John, cared a lot about this practice and the fact that their government has turned a blind eye so far. Moreover, there have been complaints that authorities use the practice as an opportunity to obtain bribes in order to supplement their meagre incomes (Cook et al. 2016). Some expressed hopes that the new prime minister, Aby Ahmed, would end this practice.

The legal framework, which advantages local retailers over foreign retailers, principally supports Ethiopian agency within the Ethio-China relations and favours cooperation between Ethiopians and Chinese. The right to open a small-scale retail business, which is linked to the Ethiopian citizenship, grant them a certain power to use this to leverage their position within the Ethio-China relations. Chinese business people are dependent on cooperation in order to open their own shop. However, as poverty is widespread in Addis Ababa, the economic power is mostly in Chinese hands. This enhances the risk for exploitation and can create dependencies. Jiatong (2019) has argued that Chinese business migrants on the China Market enhance the capacity of local workers due to joint ownership of shops and skills transfer. But further research is required to better understand how these contracts are set up and who are the real beneficiaries from these collaborations.

Bidirectional business and low-end globalisation

Tahir's and John's presence on the China Market shows that Ethio-China relations are much less unidirectional than often portrayed by Western media and politicians. While the bulk of Chinese products is imported by Chinese traders, Africans have become competitors in doing so. The growing middle class in Ethiopia, exchange students and well-educated business people, nowadays have the skills and resources to import Chinese products by themselves. New telecommunication technologies, social media and the increasing availability of internet have enhanced small traders' agency in international trade. WeChat, with over one billion users worldwide (Statista n.d.), the majority being Chinese, plays a central role in direct trading between Ethiopians and Chinese. WeChat's translation function is crucial, as it allows Africans and Chinese to directly communicate by chatting over the internet without a shared language. Moreover, intercontinental payments have been largely facilitated through integrated money transfer schemes, such as WeChat Pay or Alipay (see also Jiatong 2019). A small shop owner in Addis Ababa can now directly trade with a Chinese manufacturer in Guangzhou or Shanghai. Advanced, cheap and widely spread technology has hugely contributed to "low-end globalization" (Mathews et al. 2017). Communication and trading among people from different continents, beyond corporate companies and affluent elites, has become a global reality for some time now. But with small African traders directly interacting with Chinese vendors through smart phones, apps and messaging, the dynamic of this phenomenon has reached yet another level. The technology has leveraged the agency of small traders who understand how to use these new tools for their own benefit. John's example shows that there are Ethiopians who embrace these opportunities in order to make their business more profitable and successful.

Chinese cultural brokering

One might expect that achievements in technology and the facilitation they brought for international trade could render "connecting experts" and cultural brokers obsolete. But brokerage plays an important role in low-end globalised business relations and is by far not limited to high-end corporate business relations. John, for example, works together with a Chinese cultural broker to facilitate his import business. He is convinced that working together with Yang Yang has benefits over working together with an Ethiopian cultural broker in China. Interestingly, the usual hierarchies are turned upside down in this case. Normally Chinese

managers pay for brokering services of high skilled Ethiopians. But in Johns case, the Ethiopian entrepreneur pays for Yang Yang's services. He has the economic power to direct the interaction with Yang Yang to his own demands. They are bound together by their interest to increase earnings for both. In that case, trade has become a strong connector within the Ethio-China relations. John's agency over his business activities has profited largely from his interaction with a Chinese cultural broker. The relation between the two men has grown into one based on trust and friendship. In their particular case, Africa-China relations have evolved into a "win-win-relationship" on an individual level, characterised by mutual trust and a high degree of agency by both partners involved.

Photo gallery

Collaboration and competition on Addis Ababa's China Market



















5. Conclusions

As both literature and my own field research show, there is no such thing as a uniform Africa-China relation, nor is there only one Ethio-China relationship. There are myriad complex and multifaceted African-Chinese and Ethiopian-Chinese entanglements, with many different “Chinas” and “Africas” involved. Ethio-China relations, like Africa-China relations in general, are as much characterised by bottom-up processes steered by ordinary people as by top-down decisions made by political elites.

Ethiopians nowadays interact with Chinese migrants as workers, engineers, traders, importers, consultants, missionaries, translators and cultural brokers. Young, resourceful Ethiopians are motivated to learn Chinese for a variety of reasons: to raise their chances to secure a well-paid job at a Chinese company, to work as translators, or out of passion to learn a new language and interest for something “completely different”. Ethio-China relations also turn out to be a bidirectional phenomenon. More and more Ethiopians travel to China and experience Chinese culture themselves, be it through a state sponsored scholarship, regular studies at a Chinese university or on business trips to import Chinese goods. Technology has fundamentally altered the potential for transcontinental exchange and business relations. Advanced internet connection and social media platforms such as WeChat have become powerful tools for Ethiopians to directly communicate and negotiate with business partners or colleagues in China. Hence, Ethio-China relations now are characterised by a steady circular flow of messages, images, goods and people between the two countries. This flow is powered by peoples’ quest for a meaningful life and economic success.

5.1. Inequality of opportunities

Ethiopians exercise agency within Ethio-China relations in many ways. Well-educated, language-oriented, innovative and resourceful actors have the capabilities to direct these relations according to their needs, in meaningful and profitable ways. Such cultural brokers, often fluent in Amharic, English and Chinese, and culturally aware of customs and attitudes, facilitate business and private relations between Ethiopians and Chinese. As the demand for their services is high, their salaries can now reach amounts that until recently were only paid by western enterprises, NGOs or development agencies. To a large extent Ethiopians as well as Chinese depend on such brokers’ capacities and goodwill for efficient intercultural interactions. Hence, they are powerful agents within Ethio-China exchanges. They shape and reshape them in everyday situations in considerable ways. These middlemen are at the “[...] intersection of multiple temporal-relational contexts [and] can develop greater capacities for creative and critical intervention” (Emirbayer & Mische 1998: 1007). They manoeuvre back and forth between various social networks, as well as cultural and linguistic settings, and execute an astonishing degree of agency within their personal Ethio-China relations.

Not only cultural brokers and translator, but also Ethiopian merchants and shop owners’ profit from the Chinese presence in their country, as observed on the “China Market” in Addis Ababa. A relatively affluent Chinese clientele has provided Ethiopian businessmen and -women with new opportunities. This has allowed them to expand their palette of choices over their work and lives in the process. These merchants demonstrate great creativity, inventiveness and reflexivity in order to be successful at the market and to compete with Chinese competitors. They constantly make practical and normative judgements regarding alternative trajectories of action in response to emerging demands and situations. For example, they adapt their opening hours, their offerings and prices, they establish new networks and collaborations to purposefully and actively change the structures and conditions they are entrenched in. With this kind of agency,

they are able to overcome many of the structural limitations of the Ethiopian economy, such as low purchase power of customers and high unemployment. Moreover, there are incidents where Ethiopian shop owners actively initiate collaborations with Chinese brokers, who provide them with better access to Chinese traders and factories. Ethiopian merchants benefit from their knowledge and networks, and their ability to facilitate their journeys to China. Such active business cooperation fosters trust and friendship and, in some cases, leads to real `win-win-cooperation` on a micro scale.

In terms of agency, the situation for Ethiopian daily labourers and workers is fundamentally different from Ethiopian cultural brokers and self-employed merchants. These workers often come from backgrounds of very limited resources and opportunities, enjoyed only little education and had no chance to obtain skills that would qualify them for complex work. Consequently, they are much more vulnerable to exploitation. Chinese employers actively profit from the low labour costs in Ethiopia, the absence of a minimum wage and weak enforcement of labour rights by the Ethiopian government. According to workers, at many Chinese factories, wages are not sufficient to sustain a livelihood and only slightly exceed the international poverty line of 1.90 USD per day. Complaints about unpaid overtime, arduous working conditions and missing health care are frequent. Moreover, the strong hierarchical structures in Chinese factories leave very little room for workers` initiative, purposiveness and creativity. The freedom of choice, which is the basis for purposeful action and agency, for most workers is very limited, because of constraints of the Ethiopian labour market. Ethiopia`s economy is characterised by a high degree of unemployment and jobs with very low income. Competition among workers is fierce as a result of high fertility rates and rural migration due to ethnic conflicts and climate change⁴⁹. These structural limitations confine workers` choices and agency and support exploitative work regimes.

Big differences exist between Chinese companies and the working conditions they provide for Ethiopian workers. These differences should be acknowledged. Yet, my findings support other researchers claims (Nicolas 2017, Gelan 2018, Barret & Baumann-Pauly 2019) that a huge part of the Ethiopian workforce so far does not profit in meaningful ways from the Chinese presence in their country. Hence, the question about *who* we look at in these relations should be at the centre of all narratives about Africa-China relations. Frustrated and exploited workers may challenge the success of Chinese companies in Ethiopia in the long run, even if labour organisation so far is low in Ethiopia.

5.2. Hypocritical narratives

Considering the inequality of opportunities and limited agency, the two dominant narratives presented in chapter 2.3 turn out to be without much potential for an adequate description of the dynamics at work in interactions between Ethiopians and Chinese. Poor labour conditions are a regular subject western media and NGOs address within Africa-China relations. But these inequalities are not an exclusive feature of China`s engagement in Africa, but rather one that defines the current global economy and the underlying capitalistic system (see also Mohan et al. 2014). Entrepreneurs, in their search for comparative cost advantages, are constantly looking for low labour costs. Outsourcing production to countries with cheap labour and a lack of enforcement of labour laws is an important feature of many western companies` success. Ironically, it was particularly China which in the 80s became the preferred destiny to outsource production for many European and American brands in order to keep their production costs low

⁴⁹ In January 2019 there were 3.2 million internally displaced people (IDP) in Ethiopia. The main reasons for the IDP crisis are violence between different ethnic groups and droughts due to climate change. Political and ecological crisis are often closely intertwined and force many small-scale farmers to migrate to cities (Schlaefli 2019b).

and their benefits high. Even today, US and European companies produce their goods in exploitative work regimes all over Asia⁵⁰. Western politicians, entrepreneurs and journalists should be aware that the same business practices they blame China and Chinese companies for, underlie much of the West's own wealth. In fact, the transition from being the cheap factory of the world to becoming an outsourcer of its own production to African countries shows just how deeply China has embraced the logic of capitalism and globalised trade in order to boost its own economy. "Made in China" has turned into "Made by China in Ethiopia".

My findings from Ethiopia contribute to a body of research (Rupp in Rotberg 2008; Strauss 2013; Mohan & Lampert 2013; Mohan et al. 2014; Lee 2017) which found that many Africans don't see the Chinese presence in their country in terms of "neo-colonialism" and "predatory practices". In particular younger and well-educated Ethiopians who directly interact with Chinese migrants in their country are more focused on opportunities and personal benefits, rather than risks and fears. For many of them the "Chinese dream" relates to an alternative narrative about success and prosperity which challenges the West's dominance as the promised land of opportunities and work for Africans. Thousands of Ethiopians and tens of thousands of Africans now study at Chinese universities and are thankful to have access to universities which dispose of more resources and are better equipped than those in their home countries. Moreover, as trade intensifies between Ethiopia and China, studying in China comes with economical chances beyond studies. Through their bilingualism and their knowledge of how things work in China, Ethiopian students are able to provide highly demanded services to African visitors to China as well as to Chinese in Africa. Rather than Chinese "neo-colonialism", it is the "Chinese dream" politicians in the West should be most attentive to, if Europe and the USA are interested to attracting African talents and to build up meaningful relations to the next generation of decision-makers in their respective countries.

Many Africans nowadays do not buy into the "[...] moral platitudes of Euro-American nations that decree democracy and transparency as preconditions to economic engagement" (Rupp in Rotberg 2008: 79) anymore⁵¹. As Afrobarometer's survey has shown, political and social considerations ranked low among factors affecting China's image on the continent (Samson et al. 2016). The pragmatism of many Ethiopians to make Ethio-China relations function for them is remarkable. In the context of a challenging socio-economic and political environment, they show less interest in moral purity, as often demanded by Western politicians and journalists, but rather focus on personal opportunities, economic gains and cultural experience. All of this does not mean that Ethiopians do not critically reflect and question the Chinese presence in their country. They do show an ambiguity in respect to "the Chinese" that characterises much of the Ethio-China relations. On the one hand, Ethiopians admire Chinese work efficiency and their disciplined work ethic. On the other hand, they find social habits with respect to the treatment of people, the role of religion in life and customs of food, alienating. Social interactions between Ethiopians and Chinese that go beyond work relations are still rare to observe. The customs of Europeans and Americans, whose practitioners have been living and working in the country for much longer, seem to enjoy more understanding and admiration so far.

⁵⁰ See for example SOMOs (2017) report on the garment industry in Myanmar. Researchers found that in factories that are producing for European textile brands, labour right abuses and child labour are no exception. See also accusations of "China Labor Watch" regarding working conditions in Foxconn's factory in Zhengzhou, the main iPhone producer in China (Albergotti 2019).

⁵¹ Many Ethiopians were subject of serious human rights violations under ex-prime ministers Meles Zenawi and Hailemariam Desalegn. However, western companies, donors, the IMF and the World Bank lauded the high economic growth of Ethiopia and supported the prime ministers' "developmental dictatorship" (Urech 2019).

That said, the overly optimistic narrative supported by Chinese and African elites is not less hypocritical. Officially, Africa-China cooperation is characterised through “[e]qual consultation, enhancing understanding, expanding consensus, strengthening friendship and promoting cooperation” (FOCAC 2020). While this might be true to a certain degree in political consultations between Chinese and African politicians⁵², it is certainly not true for most of the factory workers in Addis Ababa’s “Eastern Industry Zone” and many low skilled African workers in general. Claims of “mutual benefit” and “win-win cooperation” are first of all public relation claims that show how powerful elites would like their people to see Africa-China relations. As a description for the outcomes of these relations in ordinary people's everyday lives they are worthless. Stephanie Rupp’s general description of Africa-China relations in 2008 is true until today: “China is leveraging structural characteristics of African political and economic systems that advance both the Chinese and the African states, but often at the expense of ordinary African people” (in Rotberg 2008: 66).

The question about *who* benefits most from Ethio-China relations is crucial, yet it is often neglected in dominating narratives. *Inequality of opportunities and limited agency* are at play in various degrees for different socio-economical groups in Ethiopian society. Politicians, entrepreneurs, the young and highly skilled, the labourers and farmers experience the Chinese presence in their country in completely different ways. A lack of agency on a state level can easily translate into inequalities for ordinary people in their everyday lives. Hence, from the perspective of many of the people I interviewed, the Ethiopian government should execute more agency in its relationship to China and should take more responsibility for the effects this relationship has on larger segments of Ethiopian society. Some of the cultural brokers and merchants I have met have demonstrated that living meaningful Ethio-China relations and “win-win-corporation” are possible on an individual level and that they can be characterised by “mutual trust” and a high degree of agency for both partners. That said, there are still thousands of Ethiopians who experience the Chinese presence in their country as a curse rather than a blessing and find themselves “damned to work here to survive”, as one of the workers in the Eastern Industry Zone has put it.

⁵² Although Lina Benabdallah (The China Africa Project Podcast 2020) has argued that the Africa-China relations remain very asymmetric. While many African government officials and journalists nowadays travel to China for trainings, Chinese politicians and journalists don't go for trainings to Africa. And while there are now 46 Confucius Institutes on the African continent, no African institutes with similar functions, such as teaching language and promoting the country's culture, can be found in China.

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7. Annex

7.1. Transcripts

Transcript 1

Biruk

The Huawei engineer with a linguistic mission

Interviewee: Biruk (bk)

Age: In his mid-twenties

Function / occupation: Civil Engineer, worked for Huawei in Addis Ababa, wants to become a Chinese teacher in the future

Interviewer: Samuel Schlaefli (sch)

Date: 10.02.2019

Context / Location: I came in contact with Biruk through a Swiss colleague that worked in Addis Ababa for the GIZ. She told me about a friend who was passionately learning Chinese. I invited Biruk for an interview to my Hotel.

Meaning of indications:

(...): repetitions or passages without any interest in regards of my research question

...: Pauses and unfinished sentences

/lap/: not clear what was meant or how it is written

/.../ not understood

(sch) What was your initial motivation to learn Chinese?

(bk) When I was in high school and elementary school, I was a really good student. So, I did not mind studying. I played with friends, but I also had a good attitude to read. It was kind of my hobby, it became a habit. When I went to university, I was bored. Besides from studying I wanted to do something. My friends played, went out, hung around, but I wanted to do something to keep my mind busy. So, I started studying French. I studied French three days a week and then I really liked it, it did not want to stop. I studied civil engineering for 5 years and out of the 5 years, for 3 years I was studying French. So, I reached B2 level and was able to communicate with the French people. I was so happy, it gave me even more motivation. After all the classes I wanted to do something more to keep my mind busy, I started German. I studied for one year but then work came on, I had to move. I finished college already and I found a job, not here in Addis, southside of Addis. So, I went there and then that company, which happened to be a Chinese company. I had a lot of opportunities there if I knew Chinese, I realized that. I worked for Huawei Technologies, that's a telecom company, I worked there as a civil engineer. But the Chinese wanted to give me more work and the language was a big

gateway. I had no experience back then. Most of them were my seniors, the language would have allowed me to be their boss, probably, it would have given me a raise and the like – I saw that. That was a big opportunity.

(sch) So you realized that if you would learn Chinese, this would advance your career?

(bk) Yes. To be honest the work the Chines were looking for someone they can talk to. They didn't mind if you had experience or much knowledge. Their mindset was: If you are a good person and if you can communicate with them, their English is not good, most of them, if you can communicate with them, they would offer you more things. I realized that. And then I started to learn, but my work was most of the time on the site. As a civil engineer I could not sit in the office. So I didn't get a chance to read and speak with them and the project ended unfortunately. But I was trying to see some videos, already I was interested in languages and studying Chinese would be very helpful, I saw that, I realized that. So I finished that and I came to Addis and I looked for a school to learn Chinese, like here I learned French at Alliance Française and German at the Goethe Institute. So I was looking for that kind of institution for Chinese and I was hoping that there was one. I never heard of it. So when I asked a friend, she mentioned it, she said that she has heard that there was some kind of institution. It's very far, its around (...) from where I live, its past /Mikkademia/, far from where I live, but I didn't mind, I just wanted to know. So I went there... and it was funny. I went to the office and asked them, are you (...) with the Chinese, but unfortunately the time has passed already, for two weeks. So you cannot join the classes, they said. I was so (...) to join the class, that I started to talk in Chinese, I was using all the Chines that I studied, so they saw my dedication and, ok let's try if you can cope up with the class. So they put me in the class for one day and I was answering all the questions. I was very dedicated. So then they let me join the class. And then it was like a paradise for me. The teachers were good, I was performing very well because I had my previous experiences from German and French. And I believe that compared to German and French, the Chinese language is easier.

(sch) Really?

(bir) Yes, I believe that (laughter). so, now I have been learning Chines for the last one year and two months, 14 months and I passed B2 level. So it was quick. Now I can converse with them, I am not fluent, but I am.... yeah, that's how it started. One thing which is also involved is the opportunity for business and I like meeting new people from different cultures, like Asians and Europeans and my culture. This also motivated me to learn Chinese. Now i teach Amharic and I have some Chinese friends, students. And I explain to them in Chinese, so it helps me in my work. And to the civil engineering it hasn't contributed yet now, but most probably it will in the future. That's my motivation.

(sch) I see, I see, was this in the Confucius Institute?

(bir) Yes, Confucius Institute.

(sch) Is this at Addis Ababa University?

(bir) There are two branches: One is at Addis Ababa University, the other is at this technical institute, called TVET. I took my courses at the TVET. I took my classes at TVET because I can't at the Addis Ababa University because I have to be a major student and it's not my major Chinese.

(sch) And there it is private?

(bir) You pay for it and then you can learn. I asked for Addis Ababa university, but they said it's not possible.

(sch) How much is it?

(bir) *The payment? You pay for about two months and a half 1600 birr. The lessons were good, but I mean, I learned with my own efforts. Most of my classmates they are not at my level now. This was more like a self-motivation. Now I speak the Chinese, which is very nice. I can surprise people – how can you speak Chinese, it's one of the most difficult languages in the world. But I disagree, it's not really difficult Chinese. It has some difficulties which is very different from the other languages, but it's not really difficult.*

(sch) Do you also write in Chinese or did you only learn the oral language?

(bir) *Yes I do write, it has little... for example in the German language there is „A1, A2, B1, B2“ (in German), it continues like that. So the Chinese also has that kind of level, HSK1. When they test you for example for the German language, they test the listening abilities, reading abilities, speaking and writing. These four are really important. So in Chinese it's almost the same. When you pass an exam these four skills also count. So when I say I passed B2 level, that's my level of writing also. Which is quite fascinating, the way they write, the characters, I find it fascinating. Maybe in the future... I am planning to go and learn. I applied for a scholarship, which I will know in April and then in September, I might go to China if I succeed. I passed the test, I am waiting for the reply.*

(sch) Where would that be?

(bir) *I have three places in mind: /Tienjing/, it's a city close to Beijing and the Sichuan province or Guangzhou. One of the three.*

(sch) And that was a scholarship that was provided by the Confucius Institute?

(bir) *Yes, for top performing students. and my scores were pretty much high.*

(sch) And they pay for accommodation and flight?

(bir) *For everything, everything. For six months to one year. Probably one year I would stay, what I really would love to do. Here I teach Amharic, that helps me to better understand my students. I speak a little bit of French and German and relate to those languages and see the similarities and differences of those languages. So this helps also my business. And this is my passion. Civil Engineering is ... I would not say it's my passion. I am more into the languages.*

(sch) And the Amharic classes, you are teaching by yourself or for a school?

(bir) *My friend, his name is Emanuel, he studied German and after that he started teaching Amharic. He is my best friend; we are very close friends. So he brought the idea why don't you join me and take classes. So the school is ours, I can say, it's located around Flamingo. It's like a partnership. That's where Lea also studied Amharic and Emanuel was her teacher. Now I have students, I started a month ago teaching Amharic. But I was involved in languages for six to seven years. Now it's taking some shape.*

(sch) And how many Chinese students do you have there?

(bir) *Now, I have only two. I have 12 students in total. But definitely more Chinese in the future. I just started a month ago, so it will become more and more popular in the future and definitely more Chinese students in the future.*

(sch) Because so far I haven't met any Chinese that spoke some Amharic.

(bir) *Yes, but there are. They really learn fast, faster than the Europeans. Especially when it comes to Amharic. I am not sure why, but it's easier for them to understand. They struggle with English very much, a lot obviously. But Amharic they tend to learn fast, which I am going to find out how and why (laughter). But that's what I have noticed.*

(sch) How old are your students?

(bir) *I don't know exactly.*

(sch) But are they students?

(bir) *They are actually teachers. Chinese language teachers. I met them... they are teachers at the Addis Ababa university. I told them about my school and right away they were interested. But they wanted me to offer for them only for the Chinese at the Addis Ababa university. But now with my schedule I don't have time. I am busy from Monday to Thursday with other classes. But they wanted me to offer only for the Chinese because their English is not really good. They wanted me to explain things in Chinese. Which I would be glad to offer. I will work on it and I plan to give to organizations. My Chinese is not that good actually, because I don't talk to them every day. So as long as I am not practicing it's not so good. My fluency level is not so good. So it will also help my fluency level if I can teach them. But I love the language.*

(sch) So your main job currently is teaching?

(bir) *Yes, I put the civil engineering aside. One thing led to the other....*

(sch) What about the Confucius Institute? I heard quite different things about it, I mean there are quite a lot of CI in Africa. It's only a language school or is it also kind of an introduction in Chinese philosophy, Chinese ideas, politics?

(bir) *Here actually its only languages, nothing else. but the scholarship they give you when you go to China it also includes philosophy, culture and the like. That's the categories they say they are teaching. But here its only language. But with the CI in my opinion they are not doing well to promote the language, also to teach the language. That's what I have noticed. I pushed the system to learn more out of it, but if you ask me how much students they make good Chinese speakers out of it, I would say none. Only for the ones who have the chance to go to China will speak good Chinese. The others they are not really doing a good job.*

(sch) You mean the other teachers?

(bir) *I mean other institutions as well. Because... I feel like, it's just my opinion, they don't really enjoy what they do. This is something you understand when you see them. Because the library is closed all the time, you can't take out books, they are not doing anything to make classes interesting, the like. They don't do any promotion.*

(sch) So it really needs a lot of self-motivation that you get a certain degree?

(bir) *Yes, a lot of self-motivation. And also, it's my plan to include Chinese to teach Chinese for Ethiopians in our school. Because they are not doing well. It's a good business.*

(sch) How many people were there in the class?

(bir) *In our class there were like 13 or 14.*

(sch) And do you may know, this institute how many students they had?

(bir) *Per class?*

(sch) Just in general how many classes there were, just to get an idea of how big the interest on this service is.

(bir) *What I know with that, for example for the beginner's class, probably they get 2 classes. 2 classes which means, 15 people maximum per class, in the program I was in. But they do give classes for this TVET students, which are actually learning in that institute. But those classes are mandatory. And no one is really interested (laughter)*

(sch) The TVET is kind of a technical institute?

(bir) *Yes, Technical Vocational Education Training Center.*

(sch) And that is a Chinese institute?

(bir) *No its an Ethiopian institute, but the Chinese funded the construction of the compound. They own their own block where they promote the language and culture. I think they funded a lot of money; I think they also built the compound. It's like a give and take.*

(sch) But its run by the government now?

(bir) *Yes, the government.*

(sch) And it just has a Confucius Institute inside.

(bir) *...inside, yes. But it's more like a political thing. The Chinese give scholarships for students, so that they can get better deals. Or something like that. That's my opinion, because there is no free lunch. They give some opportunities for the students and then they expect something from the government. Maybe some projects, some construction, something like that.*

(sch) So it's not just like pure goodwill?

(bir) *I don't think so. But they can do more, I believe. /.../ (on the Chinese) They have a lot of money, they are the second largest economy in the world. If they really want to promote the language and do more, they can do more.*

(sch) So you think the effort to promote their culture currently is not so big?

(bir) *No, no, but there are also workers who are motivated, who motivate students.*

(sch) Do you know if these teachers are volunteers or if they were sent?

(bir) *I think they are volunteers. But if they volunteer the government gives them some kind of benefit. They get some benefits out of here. If they go back, they get some favors. But most of them do not enjoy their time here, because most of the time they do not even go out of the compound. That's what I found out... very strange, yes.*

(sch) Why can't they go out?

(bir) *I don't know.*

(sch) So they were telling you that they don't go out?

(bir) *They can't go out.*

(sch) It's not allowed?

(bir) *Yes, it's not allowed. But they go out for.... for example, for the Chinese New Year. Or they would sneak out, without the boss knowing.*

(sch) *That sounds like a prison.*

(bir) *Yes, that is what one of the teachers has told me: I feel like in a prison. I don't know why. I mean the Chinese system is a bit different. It's not like the Europeans. They don't question why most of the time. They don't rebel against this kind of rules, they just accept it. They stay like two years or three years and they nearly don't go outside the compound, can you imagine. It's very difficult, I can't imagine, but they do it.*

(sch) *But that also means they don't have, except of the students, no relation to Ethiopian society, to the Ethiopian culture, to the customs here?*

(bir) *As you can see its very difficult if you are surrounded by a compound where you cannot go out. Like in Asia there are a lot of things that you can enjoy, not really. If they go out, they go to Chinese restaurants to eat Chinese food. That's not really what you just described. That's not related to the culture. That's why I say its political, only political.*

(sch) *What was your impression with the Chinese people you worked together with the teachers, is there an interest also in your culture, language, in your life?*

(bir) *That's one of the cultural differences compared to my European friends. The Chinese friends are not that much eager to know about culture. /.../ They do not make enough effort to understand the culture, to learn the language. And Chinese, as you said, the students are very few, it's not their priority to learn the language and the culture. I always think about why is this? I have my own assumptions. For example, Europeans in high school or in college you learn three, four languages. You take French or Spanish, or something. So, your mind is, there is something to learn out of your culture. So Europeans come to Ethiopia with this mindset. In China there is no such thing. They just only study in China. And it's also a big country, so they only speak Chinese. So their mindset is different. Maybe that's my personal opinion.*

(sch) *That's an interesting theory actually. But also, at Huawei, when you were working together with the Chinese, it was a little bit the same experience?*

(bir) *Yes, they did not really care, unfortunately. Yeah, they are pretty much focused on only one thing, only work, not culture. I mean some of them are, but in general that's what you see.*

(sch) *And you did not go out with Chinese friends for eating or to have a drink?*

(bir) *No, not at that time. But also, age is also a factor. I have Chinese friends now; the activity just came. I have one Chinese friend, 21 is his age, he is pretty young. He wants to go out, even if he is not allowed, he wants to go out more, to interact more and last time he offered me a cigarette even if I don't smoke. That's a show of friendship and that he wants to interact. Age is also a factor. But generally, it's not that way. And lack of understanding, that's also something I recognized. With my European friends I can just start a conversation and go on. We can talk about life, these abstract concepts of how you see yourself in two or five years in life or about weather, many things. But with Chinese people it's very different. I only talk about safe stuff, like food, which kind of food I like. That's also a big difference.*

(sch) *Not about life in general, philosophy?*

(bir) *It's very difficult. For example, with Lea*, Lea is a good friend of mine, last time we were talking about life, where she grew up, what she misses the most. And she told me that she is spontaneous... and this kind of things I could never imagine talking about with my Chinese friends. There are many funny things that you realize. Little things that really make a big difference, for example how they see woman. One time me, my Chinese teacher and a Korean guy and a girl, we were studying together. And then they talked together, she was from North Korea and he said: my dad always wished I was a boy. And that's very offensive for me to listen to it. Very sexist, he can't say that to hear. But he said that to her and she accepted, its*

ok. And the Chinese teacher also think it's normal to think like that. Yes, and with my European friends it's not that way. There are some common things which I get to share with my European friends, I don't know if you know what I mean.

(sch) Yes, yes, you mean like another understanding between each other.

(bir) Yes, it's really a shock to me to hear something like that. I have a sister and I have my mother and my father never said he wanted to have a boy or something like that. He never bared to say something like that. It's not right, in my belief man and woman are equal. But for them they didn't believe like that. It's something you cannot comment. So, I said ok, this is how you think. there is this big level of understanding difference. For me, I can only speak for myself.

(sch) But still you said that you have Chinese friends. Would you say that this is equal to your Ethiopian or European friends or is it kind of a special friendship?

(bir) Yeah,... (long pause), I must say it's a special friendship, yes. With my European friends, still there is some difference from my Ethiopian friends, there is some cultural difference, big cultural differences. But with my European friends, I can adapt fast and understand how they can see things. I can easily understand how they can see things. With my Ethiopian friends, they would say are you crazy if I would say them let's go hiking. What is hiking, why we climb this tall mountain? My European friends would be excited, oh yes. But I can understand Europeans easily and adapt quick. With the Chinese friends it's not the same. The gap, there is always a gap, but the gap is very big. So, I would say its special. And most of the time, before I talk to them, I think twice. How would they translate it, yes.

(sch) Did you run into situations already, where you realised that you have crossed a line or that there was a cultural clash, maybe?

(bir) Yeah, some of the times. One thing I noticed, maybe in some other cultures as well, they act really differently when their boss is around. I mean for me it does not matter if my boss is around or not. I would be careful what to say to him, but I would not completely shift my mentality. It's very dramatic how they change. They may not talk to you, they may act like they did not know you; everything is different. The boss is like the god maybe for them. And that's very shocking for me how someone can be this much transformed, yes, yes.

(sch) My experience was, I mean I spoke with many people about their views of the Chinese, especially also with people who worked together with the Chinese, and it seemed to me that they are not so well received by many Ethiopians. Many Ethiopians have made bad experiences in working together with the Chinese or interacting in some way with the Chinese. What was your experience when you were working for Huawei? (sch) Was it kind of an equivalent way of working together, or...

(bir) I think that's a very important question, what you just asked. The Chinese, if you work under them, it's very ruff how they act. But when you are equal or when you are their boss, its completely different. So the way they were acting to those working under them was very, very difficult. They wouldn't care if someone... maybe, one of my friends, he told me that someone was very injured, something human, and they would argue about the money. How much to pay to take him or who is responsible for that. So that's pretty much different, it depends of what kind of relation you have to them. My friends..., yeah that's something that really puzzled me. Before I knew my friends, my teachers at the ... university, they wouldn't talk to me. Before they knew who I am and if they can speak Chinese... First time I went there I was talking to them in English. They did not want to talk to me. /.../ That's the Chinese culture, something I don't really like. So I call them they did not talk to me. So the other day I went and in a conversation I spoke Chinese. So they were really surprised. So our relationship

transformed quickly and dramatically. So now they really respect me. Now I am their teacher, our relation has turned upside down. So my response to that question would be: It depends what kind of relationship, what kind of work chain you have with them. If they are above you or don't know you, they will really act not in a good way. That's my experience so far.

(sch) And there at Huawei, you had like a superior position to many Chinese, or...?

(bir) With the teachers, I give you one example. They were in a position when I went there, they were asking me why you go to Addis Ababa University, I wanted to take some exams, like DALF or TOFU, you go to an institution and they take the test. They don't teach me, but I go and take the test there at the test center. So when I went there, a student or someone they don't know, how they would treat me I can say it's not really good. If I ask them an information, they would tell me to go and read on the board. But when they figured out that I speak Chinese and not only that, that I am their teacher, so I am in a higher position now, the way they talk to me and approach me is pretty much different.

(sch) I was actually thinking more about when you were working for Huawei. I guess you had bosses that were Chinese. What was your experience there?

(bir) Ah, good question. They were my bosses, they were my bosses and our relationship was not really good.

(sch) Like disrespectful?

(bir) Personally me, I did not allow them to act in a disrespectful way. I did my job and send them everything correctly and I would defend my point. But if you allow them even a little bit, it will be disrespectful. I did my job correctly and would not allow this. But I see it happen with my friends, frequently.

(sch) That they felt disrespected...

(bir) Yes, definitely, definitely. But I haven't worked with other countries. I don't know if it could be this way. /.../ Or other companies, I would not know how the work atmosphere would be there. But if you are their boss, for example my roommate that I have told you, he works with a French company. He is a consultant, so he is a boss of the Chinese. He is a consultant, so he decides what they do and they really pay respect to him. They even pay everything for him, the care for him. So, if you are their boss it's really easy to get everything done. Maybe for the European it's a bit the same, but the degree..., I don't know, I am not sure how it would go with the European culture.

(sch) I guess their believe in hierarchies is probably much stronger in Asian cultures than in European cultures. I mean we also have a lot of hierarchies, in companies definitely. But it depends a little bit where you work – in government institutions there are a lot of hierarchies, in private companies often a bit less. But the believe in hierarchy and in your boss is very strong in Japan and China, as far as I know.

(bir) The other thing that I noticed, something that I liked actually. When they present for example /.../ their national theatre, for the 3d of February, yeah like two weeks before. And they started with the Ethiopian music and Ethiopian culture. Whenever there is an event, they tend to do that, which I think is nice. Whether they mean it or not, I cannot say, but it's good.

(sch) You mean making a step towards the other culture?

(bir) Yes, yes, something which is good.

(sch) Would you work again for a Chinese company?

(bir) No, I wouldn't. I mean I don't like the work environment. Unless they work under me (laughter). I am not the kind of person who can really work in that kind of environment. And that's one thing I also shifted through languages. There are people I think that should interact on that level, respect each other and get to share ideas, That's my personal... I wouldn't mind about the money really. That's what keeps me happy. No, I wouldn't.

(sch) Especially because of the work relationship that you described before?

(bir) Yes, for me it's not conducive. I mean that's what you heard from people being not happy about their work. I wouldn't.

(sch) What about the payment?

(bir) The payment was good, for me it was good. I earned more than anyone I know. But the work was also very hard. It demanded my energy. And I risked a lot of things, I worked in remote areas. I wouldn't say it was not equivalent to what I do, but it was much much better than the average pay here in Ethiopia. I couldn't complain about the payment. But actually, they don't pay good. I was an exception. If you check on construction sites in Addis Ababa, it's not a good way how they treat them.

(sch) May I ask how much you earned?

(bir) I earned 30'000 Birr per month. That would be like 1000 (Dollars). It was not bad.

(sch) And that was just after graduating?

(bir) Yes just after graduating.

(sch) But that is not a normal case?

(bir) No, that was really an exception. it was a big project and they really got a lot of money from the government, a national project. That's why they paid that money.

(sch) What did you do, work on the mobile system?

(bir) Telecom foundations. The tele towers – the foundations. constructing of the foundations. Supervision of the construction.

(sch) For the mobile signals?

(bir) Yes.

(sch) So you were all over the country?

(bir) All over the country. I went to the west and to the south. I went to the east and the south, so I was travelling around.

(sch) And you lived there on the spot?

(bir) Yes, I lived there. Sometimes I slept in the car. It was really demanding work.

(sch) How long were your working days?

(bir) As long as there is work. Sometimes I rested for three or four days and sometimes I worked the whole week. I supervised the sites, so I managed my time. No one asked me to go to the sites, as long as I send them reports. And when the construction is done on schedule, like in time, they wouldn't control me. They measured my performance on the results.

(sch) But you did not live together with the Chinese?

(bir) Not really. That's why I did not get a chance to practice my Chinese. But I was in the head office several time. They wanted me to join and do some work with them.

(sch) But that was not possible, because they did not speak English?

(bir) Not much, yes, yes.

(sch) So, you had a translator then?

(bir) I had to break my English down to pieces in order to understand. Like: You go... I come. Something like that.

(sch) But that makes working together very slow and complicated, I guess?

(bir) Yes, yes, very complicated, especially on the phone, you could not really communicate. E-Mails are better.

(sch) You can use Deepl or Google Translate...

(bir) But after some time they would speak the language, English, better and better. When they come its really difficult. But after they stay like 5 months, 6 months or a year, it gets better and better. But there is something that I like about the Chinese: Its different, it's very, very different; something unique, the language, the culture, the food. I mean, since I was a kid, we get to see on the TV the European and American culture. But the Chinese culture... That's why I want to go to China and see how people live.

(sch) And do you like the food?

(bir) Yes, I tried some. Most of them are very difficult for me. But I like adventures, so I want to try more.

(sch) Do you have many colleagues that enjoy it and that are as open as you to Chinese culture?

(bir) No, people are really closed. I don't know why. Even tot the language /.../ I don't know, they must do some kind of promotion, because peoples mind is very closed towards the Chinese. That was my experience also, even when it comes to food. Most of them said they would never try it they would say, I would never try. They think like they eat dog food all of them, which is not true. Only few parts and few people eat dog food. The Chinese share a boarder with Koreans, on that boarder they eat dog food. They inherited it from the Koreans, for the Koreans its common to eat dog food. But in other parts of China don't do and people still think every Chinese person eats dog food. (...)

(sch) To me it seems that a lot of Ethiopians have this strong feeling that in Ethiopia, and you probably also have that in other African countries, that the Chinese are here to exploit the country and also exploit the people here.

(bir) Yeah, I mean that's what they would like to do. I am not a politician, but every country has their own intentions. Especially the governments. If they do something, it's not charity. Even the USAid, they call it the China Aid, they are putting a lot of many to Africa for aid. I believe that this is not only something they do to help the country only. They want to get something out of it. And the Chinese are doing that; something that European countries or USA have been doing for a long time. But surprising is that the Chinese are doing it right now. They have just started doing it, because now they have the power and they want to become more prosperous. That's how I see it. They want to get something out of it. But my question would be, my main point would be: We should control our way of interacting with them. We should know to what we give priority to and to get the most out of this situation. I mean they

are here, so how do we get most out of it? For example: They do roads, they do buildings. Its good! But what's the quality? And debt, there is a lot of debt. How can we minimize our debt and maximise the quality? But to push them out, I think it would be a foolish thing to do. To get the most out of it should be our goal. I am not against that they are here. They got better offers most of the time. But we must maximise. What's different with the Chinese from Europeans or Americans, the Chinese can compromise a lot on quality. But we should stand fierce and demand more quality. But I am not against them being here. And if you ask me, in the future they will be more prominent. That's something that we can't stop right now, I believe. If the US, if they might try... but I don't think that even them could stop the influence of the Chinese. They are growing in every way, it's something inevitable.

(sch) And you don't fear that?

(bir) My fear would be, people don't know how to use the Chinese influence. I am not afraid them being here, but it depends on how to use them to our advantage. Because even the prime minister now, Dr. Aby, he is a young, educated guy and I think he is smart enough. He stopped many projects when he came, not signed. And many Chinese friends were very upset about it. So that's how we should do it. First, get them to complete what they have started. On signing new deals, it must be controlled /.../ and competed. And the better one will win. In that way we can benefit. If not, there's going to be /.../ a lot of debt and the roads are, they need maintenance and the buildings may have not good quality. That would be a disaster. But I have hope that our government and our president would be wise enough to realise that on time and have a solution for it.

(sch) But you did not make very good experiences in the past as far as I understood. The former government seemed to be very in favor for the Chinese investors.

(bir) Yes, and also corrupt government. The Chinese are very keen on exploiting corrupt Chinese governments. They would do everything to bribe and... yes, we should not allow that. When I worked at Huawei. And not only I worked in civil engineering, but also in networking. Even if it was not my profession. I took a training to configure and deliver configuration and checking, for example the 3G connection. I checked the quality and handed it over to Ethio Telecom. So the Ethio Telecom guys, the Huawei our bosses, they bribed them to accept the results, that actually failed. You really could see that the data failed, but they signed and they passed. So the Chinese are really keen to exploit such... they would rather give some money and skip the work. So that's the problem, big problem. Ethio Telecom service is not good in most of the places. This is the first reason why, because they accept failed test. This affects everything, the economy. You cannot do your work here and I cannot do my business online, because of the connection. So this affects all of us and the economy would suffer. This is just one example. And there are many examples where the government should make these adjustments. But otherwise Chinese are a good option, if you can work with them properly.

(sch) But you have to close all the wholes where corruption is possible.

(bir) Yes, that's different from the Europeans. Ericsson, you know the company, they actually came here to compete with Huawei. But they could not compete with Huawei. Why? If you ask me, because of this corruption. And there was this one case: Where Huawei finished it in 12 days, but it was previously given to Ericsson, but they could not complete it in four months. What did Huawei do? They paid a lot of money to work for 24 hours, which Ericsson could not do because of the 8 hours rule. And they compromised with some of the quality. Ok, they then work for 24 hours, but what about the quality? They give you these options. And the corrupted government officials they... And the second thing is, they just want this for a political reason. They want to say, we completed like 12 sites in one day and put in on TV. In Africa what makes the Chinese very dangerous is that here most of the governments are corrupt and they know how to exploit them and get their advantage. That would be my fear.

(sch) So you really need strong governments to keep control in their own hands.

(bir) Yes, but pushing them away is not a solution, this would not be very smart. Because they have... they are very workaholic, they have the skills, they have the technology they have everything. (...) That's how I see the Chinese. (...)

(sch) That will be interesting for the future. Especially with the new government.

(bir) What I can tell you on the construction... The Abyi government, the new prime minister, main projects were signed without careful analysis. But now he held all these deals and new signings and said stop, no more, no more new contracts! so the Chinese benefited from these kinds of arguments. They sign contracts without any bids. This is what I know on the construction, but I am not sure about the other fields. That's the thing that they would not want to happen, the Chinese.

(sch) Because before it was really easy for them to get the contracts?

(bir) Very easy. Now he seized all of the projects, until we do a careful assessment. He is doing a reform. He wants to change these people and the administration process, which I like. But that's something they would not like. (...)

Transcript 2

Tesfaye

Getting close to the Chinese by the will of God

Interviewee: Tesfaye (tes)

Age: In his mid-twenties

Function / occupation: Freelance translator, graphist, mediator and facilitator for Chinese clients

Interviewer: Samuel Schlaefli (sch)

Date: 2.02.2019

Context / Location: I asked Tesfaye for an in-depth interview after working together with him for several days. He facilitated contacts to Chinese business migrants for me and translated interviews with them. Tesfaye is fluent in Mandarin and he knows many Chinese in Addis Ababa. Our interview takes place in an upmarket coffee shop called “Golden Coffee Roastery” in the centre of Addis Ababa. Tesfaye greeted other guests. It seemed that he often frequents this place.

Meaning of indications:

(...): repetitions or passages without any interest in regards of my research question

...: Pauses and unfinished sentences

/lap/: not clear what was meant or how it is written

/.../ not understood

(sch) It would be great, if you could for the beginning, recount all the different activities you are doing with the Chinese. You talked to me about quite some different activities you are involved with the Chinese. Could you tell me about what these activities are?

(tes) So, primarily I learned the language in order to preach to the Chinese people. Because ever since my childhood, I always wanted to preach to others. And one way was learning a new language and learning teaching others, since I was raised in Jehovahs Witness. And after I learned the language, I wanted to make my language more advanced. So, I wanted to progress in my language, so I started to spend more time with the Chinese people.

(sch) Sorry that I interfere here, but could you explain how you learned the language?

(tes) So, the language that I learned, there were actually two American people, they were a couple, husband and wife, they came here in order to teach, they came here only for four months. And their primary goal was to teach those who are interested to expand their ministry, expand their preaching activity. So that was how I learned. We used to learn every Saturday, beginning from 9 to six, for four months. So that will make up for learning the language for 36 hours in general. And by the time they were leaving they told us, this is not only enough in order to be at a good level of Chinese. So, we needed to spend more time with the Chinese people and learn more. So I remember at that time I used to spend about four

hours a day to learn the language, listen to some music, watching video, listening to a talk, practicing on the pronunciations and going outside and preaching and listening to the Chinese, their feedback, on whether they understood what I was saying or not. So that was how the situation was. But in the meantime, it started to grow, our ability to speak the language started to progress.

(sch) But your initial motivations was really to be able to preach to Chinese people?

(tes) Yes, yes. And after that, I think it was after two years of learning the language, the first time I started working with the Chinese. And there, as I was explaining, I was very good at the first day conversation, introducing myself, understanding what they were saying, but the day to day work, that was not an easy thing for me. But since I worked for months in a local company as a graphic designer, that's what attracted the Chinese people to hire me. And also, my knowledge of Chinese made them think that there will some way of communication between them and me. And they hired me, it was a hard time to communicate with them, especially the first times, asking me to go somewhere for them – I could not understand what they were saying. It was at the beginning of opening a company for them, so I could say that I didn't have a lot of work, so I used that time in order to study. So I had books already and some of the Chinese people were very much amazed of how I was progressing fast, so they gave me some books and some audios and I was reading that. And in the house, they make the house as a guesthouse, so there were new Chinese people coming and I tried to have a conversation and have a „Chinese dish“, a Chinese television program. So I watched and I make records and in a few months, I would say in five or six months I was able to communicate with them and at that time I was able to translate the other workers. At that time the company was already established, some work started already. So in a year or so I became more well in translating – and after that I started teaching for the first time and I taught for about three months and the schedule was Monday, Wednesday and Friday, three times a week, I used to teach them for three hours. And in the one hours I used the book that was prepared by the school and the other hour I used ... other information I get from my experience that will help them. And at that time, they liked it very much because I was using some of the techniques our teacher used and that made some students more interested to learn the language. And among the students, two of them became very well and they progressed to the point of going to China, one of them, taking HSKA two or three and they went even further in studying more Chinese. And the other I remember, she started to teach in two years also. She wanted to invite me when she got the first salary of teaching the language. So that was the time and still my primary goal was to preach, so I kept on doing the work. I started to help the Chinese open up a company. I used to teach Chinese and to translate trainings. Some companies, local companies, they buy machines from China and that machine can only be operated by the Chinese people. So when the company sells the machine, they sell two Chinese people, (that) only speaks Chinese, to train the Ethiopian people. So that training should be enhanced by a translator. So in school I was very much interested in physics and chemistry. and mathematics, so I somehow understood technical things. So I used to translate things, so the technicians also understood the translation process. And I did that two times for a big company, daylight, that one of the midrow companies, that's one company that is opened by the most rich people in Ethiopia, Sheik Hussein Al Amoudi. And also, for other companies I used to help in this regard as a secular job. And since my primary goal is to help the Chinese to preach after that I started to be a full-time preacher for the Chinese. That means I had to spent quite a number of time to preaching to the Chinese, that's still my goal, so I was very happy. But being able to fulfill my responsibility as a preacher when I have some open time, I still used to work with the Chinese, opening companies, helping them to process their things at the government office and translating at their offices. And also, city tours that's going to be taking place in one day. There were a lot of works that I rejected because of my tight schedule at that time. And there were some companies that wanted to work with the Chinese people, as partners, so I used to do as a mediator, translating between them and that was the time that I

learned translation skill is not only a language but also a skill that will help them to reach a certain sets of agreements. So that's using the right words, not making, you know, not use offensive expressions, both parties might use offensive expressions, so try to water down the offensive expressions and translate it to the other party, so that was some of the skills I learned. And after working for two years as a full-time preacher, I just finished my time, and now, I am still preaching as a voluntary worker, but still working secularly with the Chinese people. So, that's what I have been doing until now.

(sch) Tell me a little bit about, you mentioned full time preaching, how do I have to imagine that? Was it mainly in the community house that I have seen for gatherings or was it really like going to the people in the city talking to them?

(tes) *Well, that's full time service activity, just any Jehovah Witnesses engage in the preaching activity. But the special full-time servant is someone who is only focused on the preaching activity, mainly. His live will focus on the preaching activity, so in order to do that, some of his expenses, basic expenses, will be covered by the organisation. So if I explain it to you, that means I get the money, the money I can get with working two days with the Chinese company in a month. So I had to choose to live a lower life, like a poor person, not getting a lot of money, but only small money that will cover my expenses, like food, clothes and rent. (... help congregation, teaching people)*

(sch) I see, you mentioned also some other activities came on top when we spoke, like for example making translations in the court, as a mediator for marriages, was also one thing and opening businesses with the Chinese.

(tes) *Yes, with regards to the courts, usually called when there is a case. Maybe the Chinese make some mistakes, or the Chinese are the victims sometimes. The first time I translated in the court was for my Chinese friend, his phone got stolen when he was coming out of the kingdom hall (JW) and we had to chase the thief and we have to take him to the police. Then they have to take him to the court and that's how I went as a translator to my friend. After that I had a few chances to translate in front of the court. So that time I had to be very discrete, because I have to know the words, that I have to use in front of the court and some very humble words. My grandfather was a lawyer and my mom used to go to courts for some inheritance things. They used to mention a lot of terminology that we should use in the courts. So I was somehow familiar with this and I always had to say the Chinese that they are very careful of what they say in court. So usually if they were the ones who did the crime or if they are the suspects, they are usually asked from the courts about the situation. They tell the situation and I have to make the translation to the court. Sometimes there were a few Chinese in the courts, so I had to translate for all of them. There were cases that I took to the police station. With regards to that, when you enter the court you have to make an oath to translate the truth. And when it's in the police station you have to sign, saying that I (Tefaye) translated and that I will be accountable for that. It kind of has some risks, so the amount asked for courts or police stations is not the same as the others, even though it's for an hour or two, because it has more risk. And the other thing that I said about a mediator between marriage, because sometimes there are some marriages between the Ethiopians and the Chinese. And sometimes they only have the basic communication they can use, the gestures or other ways. When there is a serious thing, maybe a conflict or may be about a business if they want to have this kind of things, they sometimes call me. And mostly they call me because I am their friend. And since I am their friend I normally don't ask them for money, but I have to help them as a mediator sometimes, having my bible knowledge, I sometimes share bible principles that both should apply in their life and because of that they were able to make some changes in their life. And some of them they didn't make it, but they were not in a serious... I mean they were together for quite a long time, but they did not take the legal procedure in order to get married. It's not so difficult to*

separate because they were not legally first. So I try to translate what they are saying to one another and try to say them to do the right thing, to go through the legal procedures to do it in the right way.

(sch) And you really have people, Ethiopians and Chinese, that wish to marry each other but are not able to communicate with each other?

(tes) The main problem that arises between a Chinese guy and his Ethiopian wife, was because he called his friend to come to Ethiopia and he was looking for an Ethiopian girlfriend for him. And she was not very happy, because she felt as if using Ethiopian girls as a toy. Purposely coming here looking for a wife, even though he had not any language skills. And also they were engaged in some unclean immoralities. So she was not very happy and because of that I was called. So the husband also start to associating with him, that's why I was called, even though he was the one who called him, telling him that he will have a wife. And one time a Chinese even asked me that he was interested to open a company, like a commission agent that will help the Ethiopians and the Chinese to marry each other. So he told me that he needed a wise person to consult with him, that's why he has called me. He said that this is common in other countries, so what we will do is to get a certificate that shows his singleness and that certificate he will bring from China and all the other ones and then the Ethiopian woman will come and see all the documents, its going to be more formal. He said we will do it in a professional way. So there were some people interested in that. And there are some people that told me they are looking for an Ethiopian wife. One guy told me, if you make all Chinese people a pair, the left over will be 40 million guys, so they will have no spouse. So they should come to African countries to look for a wife. So they use this as one reason to look for a wife outside their country.

(sch) And is my impression right, I had the impression that there are much more Chinese man coming to Ethiopia than woman?

(tes) That's very true. Because you can say that many of them have a wife in China. And sometimes you see them raising their phones and chatting on a video chat, you see their wife in front of the screen and also their wife. So they do have a wife and child back in China. But there are some single ones.

(sch) Do you know how often they see them?

(tes) Almost every day you can say, on the phone.

(sch) And in real life, is there a lot of going forth and back?

(tes) I sometimes listen when they say, four times a year or two times a year I travel to China and sometimes they don't have to travel at all, just one time a year or something, for the new year. But at least once a year.

(sch) Do you know why they don't bring their families over to Ethiopia? Because it seems to be quite hard to be so far away.

(tes) There are some who bring their family, but very few. Some of them are settled here, some of them wants to work for short time to have some savings and go back to China. So having this in mind, when they come here, they will have a raise. They will get much more money and the payment will be made through the bank they have in China. So here they will get a pocket money or something and there they get the real money in their notes. I think that's the reason they don't want to ... because they want to go back to China.

(sch) So most of them are here only for a couple of years you would say?

(tes) Yes, yes, I never found a Chinese who wanted to spend his old ages here.

(sch) You never met one single person who enjoyed the life here so much that they wanted to stay longer?

(tes) They do, some of them even... I mean there was one guy that I know, six years or so, he was about to be deported. Then he married a Muslim girl and stayed here. He don't want to go back to China. But I am not sure if he really wants to stay here for the rest of his life. I mean for the time being he has a reason. I had one Chinese friend who was here for about 20 years and he is now in prison because of a cheque that has no money in it ... what do you call? (...) And he told me that he could go back to China, but he stays here because he still wants to do his business here. And his wife is in China, he goes sometimes to china. But you know, the mentality behind it is, I believe, going back to China when their age is very old. They even have an expression saying /lowyen guegang/, that means, a leave that drops will go to the roots. So that means it starts from the roots, goes up to the leaves and comes back to the roots – saying that even though we are spreading to all the countries, at the end we will all go back to China. That's the expression they say. (...) I feel like all of them want to go back by the end.

(sch) What's their main motivation to come to Ethiopia?

(tes) To make more money, to make a business. But some of them wants to have a wife. Some of them want to take advantage of the opportunity, so they are looking for a girlfriend.

(sch) What would you say, of all the people that you know, what are the main points Chinese people struggle when they come to Ethiopia?

(tes) The food, the mentality of the people. Because the Chinese they have a mentality of work only and the Ethiopians are not like the Chinese. They are god fearing, but they don't see work and money as their primary things in life. The other things come first, like family, you know... In some cases, I can say that we are somehow lazy in some point. So, that's very a big challenge for the Chinese people. Well, the other thing is, the things they like in China, they don't find that here. Some infrastructures for example. The way, the situation of how slow it is in the government office, how it's not easy to establish something, how it's not easy to make money. There are some systems that are very difficult for the Chinese to accept. And sometimes because of what they do to the locals, they reply back – it's also a challenge for them. Because the Chinese are not good to the Ethiopians they will reply in a bad way. So some people have this mentality in mind and they treat even good Chinese in a bad way, thinking that all chines are bad. This I would say are some of the challenges for the Chinese.

(sch) How are Chinese people considered by the majority of Ethiopian people out of your experience?

(tes) I mean the majority of the people see the Chinese as hard workers. And after the Chinese came some of the works that were not done by many people started to be more and more common. For example, driving a big truck and driving big machineries. Working with the Chinese... it opens a big way for the Ethiopians. Some Ethiopian companies they have Chinese clients, so because of that I can say that the majority of people have benefitted from the Chinese, so they have a good view. But as you know in all places you have good people and you have bad people. So those who work with Chinese in a factory, those are treated bad. Well they do have a very extreme view about the Chinese. They shout from far, saying „Chinese ni hao“ and when the Chinese smile back they insult them or so. They don't have a good mentality.

(sch) Where does this come from?

(tes) Because they work with the Chinese, they are somehow influenced by the Chinese. So those who have experience with the Chinese they might somehow not like the Chinese, because they have a bad experience. Because of that maybe.

(sch) But you would say that most of the Ethiopians working with the Chinese profit from this cooperation?

(tes) Yes, because the salary, even though you don't categorize it as a high salary, is higher than in the local places they get and even much is required from them. I mean in the local they may not be supervised but in the Chinese, they have to work very seriously. They get work with the Chinese. And because of that they like the Chinese. I mean those who work with the Chinese, there are a lot who like the Chinese also. And there are some who have a great view about the Chinese, nor white, nor black, just like, you know, as normal foreigners.

(sch) In my research I have to say that I heard a lot of complaints, especially regarding working conditions and also salaries. A lot of people said, we can't make a living with these salaries.

(tes) What you say is very true. I mean, you can't blame the Chinese. When they come here they are told that they have a low human power in Ethiopia. That is one of the things that attracts them here. So when the Chinese come here they are looking for someone they can hire for a low salary. Those who have a degree get much higher salaries than the others. There are some Chinese companies that I believe, they give a very low salary. And the way they treat their workers is... you know, it's very unjust. So because of that at one point we even went to the labor office and they told us a 150 workers came to sue the Chinese. You can imagine how small the office is and how many people cannot fit in. Most of them had to stay outside because the room was full. So there are a lot of complaints to the Chinese... And because of that they don't get the good results that they could get because Ethiopians may not work as they want. And sometimes they even punish them with that small salary. With the Ethiopians, as I told you they... we are good fearing, even if they make a mistake we might say, just give him another assignment and not just take his salary, because we know at the end he will not have anything to eat at home. The Chinese are like merciless sometimes. And because of that they are somehow attacked by the Ethiopians. You know the Ethiopians attack them sometimes, because of the way they treat them.

(sch) You mean really physically?

(tes) Yes, physically attack them! Because that is why the Chinese are afraid even. So somehow you can say they are reaping what they sow. But, I mean, not all of them are bad. I mean there are cases that you see. For example, as a tour guide... I know how the other tour groups from America or Europe treat the guide. And at the end how much tip they give, sometimes 200 Dollars or Euros – they give him a tip. And they give the same amount to the driver. But the Chinese, they ask you, even at lunch time, even at dinner time you don't rest. When you explain at the place they don't listen, they take pictures and when you eat, they come and ask you. They make your life very busy at that time. By the end they don't give you anything, they don't give you a tip or something that shows appreciation. In other ways they might show you kindness by saying when you come to China you will come at my home, you don't pay anything, you just simply have to pay the plane ticket and come. They do that if they like you. And if you want to come to China, you can do a business with us. (...) So they give you this option. This is the kind of mentality difference. I am not saying they are stingy... in the way they show their generosity they show it, but not in this way.

(sch) Would you say that the Chinese here in Ethiopia have a little bit of a public relation problem? That their image is not very favorable?

(tes) *Of course. First of all, the Ethiopian culture, many of the people, especially the orthodox, that's the majority of the people, they only eat food that is in the mosaic law. So pork, other kind of wild animals, snakes, dogs, they don't eat these kind of meats. So having in mind what they eat will make them disguise the Chinese people. The other thing is the way they treat you (...) with disrespect the Chinese. I mean it's their culture – the more I worked with them I started to understand. And you know, you just start to ignore it. But the Ethiopians might not like it. Because the Ethiopians have respect. But the Chinese sometimes don't have respect; they really don't have respect. So because of that, the image they have among the public is not good. But still they are understandable, because they are foreigners. If a local people would do that nobody would understand him. But they say „ah, he is Chinese, yeah“. But still they are socially awkward.*

(sch) Would you really say that it is in their culture that they don't show respect to Ethiopian people? That sound quite harsh to me.

(tes) *Well, the way they treat the Chinese is not the same as the way they treat Ethiopians, so... I don't say its 100 percent the culture. Some of them have some, I don't really know how to say, but they have some disrespect, but it doesn't represent everybody. I mean at the place the Chinese people I work with, their name is Willy and Joe, the company owners, they are very good for example. They try to be good to the locals and they are very good even to me. They do have respect. So even sometimes I am angry at them, I shout at them. They listen, really. There are some who are very good. And there are some who are, you know, since they are here, they are like the god. They have this mentality. Some of them think they know, but they don't really know. So they have this kind of (attitude) by being in Africa they are superior. So they do sometimes have this kind of mentality. But I say this does not represent all Chinese people, there are some good Chinese people.*

(sch) Would you say that you have found some personal friends, like really relations that go beyond business relationships?

(tes) *Yes, we started with business and finally made a ... you know. I mean the ones that I told you, I still work with them. They are even interested to open a business, invest their money, so you can see just how much they trust me.*

(sch) But I mean this is just business somehow...

(tes) *Business, but just friendship for example... I was talking about how I was introduced to my you my fiancé, my girlfriend, showing them pictures of her. You know you do that only with friends. And they even told me, you are not only like business people (...), you are like our brother. You can view me as a big brother, so you can come with her and introduce me and I will give her the red envelope, „hung bao“ they call it. A gift, the big brother gives money to the wife in a red envelope. It's a Chinese culture actually, so they give „hung bao“ to show appreciation. So he even said that to me. We even talk about some personal things. I can say with them I am friends, they are very good. And also at our meetings with Jehovas Witness, she is also our very good friend to us. She told us everything, you know, like a brother, like a family person and we gave her some scriptures from the bible...like a friendship. Family things, how everything happened back in China... so I believe that I found some Chinese who can be real friends.*

(sch) In my discussions I had with some Chinese people now, that spoke English of course, I always had the impression that there was a lot of fear when it comes to their environment, being in Africa, in Ethiopia. Would you say that is correct – do you feel that as well?

(tes) They do have fear. And some of that mistreatments I can say are coming from that fear. Because of that fear they are more inclined to believe the Chinese people rather than the local people. So by the time they come here they ask you for information and of course you give it to them. But they trust more the information they get from the Chinese. Somehow its distorted. Because of that they somehow treat the Ethiopians not in a good way. So sometimes this fear comes from the way they treat the Ethiopians as well and sometimes the fear comes from the political instability in Ethiopia and the fact that they are away from their country and not very confident that they are protected by the law. Because of this and other reasons, they might have some fear.

(sch) What is your impression, I mean the Chinese opened up a lot of factories a lot of industrial parks, they built a lot of infrastructures in Ethiopia, are all these projects really in the favour of the people of Ethiopia?

(tes) Absolutely!

(sch) Will they profit from it or will actually the Chinese companies profit more from it?

(tes) I mean in workways; in building infrastructures they are flawless. They do everything perfect. The way they do it is quality. You know, the infrastructures, the train, the asphalt roads, the electricity, the dams – everything they build, they are very much in favour of the people. And sometimes... let me give you an example of the renaissance dam, for example. It's a government project and it hasn't been finished in due time. Why? Because of the corruption. You know, they are corrupted, they stole the majority of the money. That you see is Ethiopians. But the Chinese, they work really hard and they have results. And because of that you can see, many of the roads, even this road, the bole road... I remember the old road here and because of the African Union in 2012 that has been inaugurated, this road was built. They do it in less than a year I believe, I don't know remember exactly, but they did it so fast... So you can see, that what they did is very neat, very diligent and very quality and practical. So with regard to their work, they bring quite a lot of contribution to the country. That you can't deny, its visible. Even the way they construct.... didn't I show you the commercial bank?

(sch) The new building that they are constructing?

(tes) Yes, (...) so you now can see the structure, we never saw any mud outside of the compound! But when the locals do, when they construct, they do not only put the mud, they also destroy the road. So there might have been an asphalt road before, but after the construction of a house that road has to be renewed, they have to maintain it, otherwise it will become a very ruff road. With regards to work....even once I remember when I was young I once heard the Chinese made a joke about the Ethiopians, because they were doing the asphalt road, the maintenance of the road, and they stole the cement and some of the materials they use for the asphalt. And because of that the Chinese were surprised and asked, „by the way do the Ethiopians have another country?“ (laughter), you know, thinking that this is another country and they are stealing from this country and saving to their country, so because they stealing from their own country. So they say, do the Ethiopians have another country? So they were making... and even they were saying, the thing that you use, what you call it...

(sch) The shuffle?

(tes) The shuffle, yes, they say that the Chinese are very diligent, and the shuffle is very tall, right, its long. So when they were giving them that shuffle the Ethiopians were leaning on the shuffle under their arm. So the Chinese saw that they are not working, that they use the shuffle to lean on and talk. So they cut it short that it becomes at their /lap/ so they started to sit on it. So, you know, they were making a lot of jokes between the Ethiopians and the Chinese how diligent they are and how lazy we are (laughter). So with regard to work, you can't find any...

(sch) But on the other hand I heard a lot of complaint when it comes now for example to the light rail here in Addis. I mean there were a lot of people saying there are much less wagons operating than in the beginning, the wagons that are running right now are normally completely full, there are a lot of delays... So there seems to be some concerns also...

(tes) Well, actually, how can you blame this on the Chinese? Because what you need to know is, this is a big city and we only have one railway. Even the roads you can see... you know the roads are very crazy sometimes, how crowded it is. So we do not have enough roads that enhances the flow of the cars. So, the transportation is a problem here. The Chinese are not the one who make the road plans, they are not the ones who make the plans for the road. Its a government project. What the Chinese do is they have to construct it. Thats what they do. But the railway...

(sch) But they also finance a lot of it.

(tes) Yes, they finance a lot of it. But I mean it's hard for me to blame it on the Chinese. Because the transportation is a big problem, because we don't have enough roads but the people coming to Addis are becoming more and more, you find more work here, so from the city place the number of people is growing. Transportation is becoming more and more a problem. Sometimes instead of going outside of Addis, many are coming to Addis, expanding it.

(sch) So you would say that the mobility infrastructure here in Addis has really profited from the Chinese investment through...

(tes) Of course, of course, it has benefitted. We cannot deny what the Chinese did. I think it's very visible. Of course, there are flaws. But in China for example... Because the Chinese people give you options. They have things in China that are very good, but that don't work here. For example, one Chinese guy told me he wants to sell a Bajaj, that's a three-wheel car and I told him that it might not be a good idea. Because the Indian Bajaj they are good in the market, but the Chinese no. They said why? Do the Ethiopians don't like the Chinese? We said no, because the motor, the Indian cools down, but the Chinese becomes very hot. And it does not go well with the rough roads in Ethiopia and you are not allowed to use the main roads with the Bajaj. (...) The Chinese they are capable to do whatever you ask them. I mean they do what they are asked with regards to infrastructure of the railways.

(sch) But on the other hand I would say they are also directing a little bit what projects will be done with their loans. A lot of projects the Ethiopian government could never have been done by the government themselves. So there is also quite a big power from the Chinese players to steer...

(tes) Yeah, but still you have to know that the boss is not the Chinese companies. Even though they finance it, they are not the boss. That's the main problem... Its sometimes, they might have some corruption between them, the bosses and the Chinese people. But you know it's hard, especially with regards to the Ips, the industrial parks, you remember how the Chinese explained on the first day we went. Sometimes you have to explain them it works in China, but it does not work here. The first plan we had, we cannot do according to that plan, because of the situation we are in here and it's hard for them to understand. So, it's very hard to explain for me also what the problem is. But one thing I can explain you is that the Chinese did a lot here. And I cannot blindly say they are bad at all. I mean I met some really bad Chinese that treat the Ethiopians like a dog, very unfair, very cruel. And I met Chines who are good. The things we see, we cannot deny it, the infrastructures, the railway, this is something I can say, they did a lot.

(sch) Let's get back to your personal work again, could you... I found that fascinating when you explained how you get to your jobs, the networks you are working with.

(tes) Ok, the networks, that's how it comes. The first time that I worked with the Chinese, I

realised that there is a big need in the Chinese field. So I had a WeChat, WeChat is a Chinese application and I formed a group. Every time I went to a government office or anywhere, I met a Chinese translator. I add them to my WeChat and add them to the group. So that group started to expand like a tree, whom I added they added more people. So because of that once I met this guy and a Chinese person entered in our group, so this guy also made a group, so he took many of the people and now we are using his group that he makes. So this guy is very clever also very good in Chinese. His name is /Shūze/, he is very good also, he is like my friend also, I like him so much. He made that group and using that group, whenever someone meets a Chinese person who is looking for a translator, we send him directly to the group. So sometimes we have to write the requirements and those who fulfill the requirements they call. And we use that as a means. And the other thing that I used, you know...

(sch) Let me just interfere quickly... how many people are in this group now?

(tes) *Two hundred and something... translators only. Let me check it. Currently... I mean, the numbers do not necessarily represent the number of Chinese translators here. It says 252 now, but considering some of them have more than one account, so you can say more than two hundred.*

(sch) These are all Ethiopians living in Addis, speaking Chinese?

(tes) *Yes. And the forum that I have, 276, it has Chinese and Ethiopians. So we also have other groups like this and whenever we are interested in work, we say, I am looking for a part time job, if you have any work, look for me, you know sometimes when they have we share with them. And other than this one, because of this, I sometimes have to stay home and I get work, so the Chinese are the ones to call me. But sometimes we have to do extra efforts. I have to give my CV to some tour companies or... currently I am thinking especially for the high season, for the investments. Since I am a graphic designer, I will design a /pamphlet/ I will give it to my friend in the investment office and will tell him that I will give him a commission. And I will also go to some hotels that I know they have Chinese and give them my tour pamphlet and I will tell them that I will give them 5 percent commission. So this is the way that I think of doing in the future. The others, if you are in the work, you will be more in contact. There are some Chinese translators they don't have any contact. So for example when I choose work, I don't only choose work by seeing the salary. And once they told me they will give me 30'000 to 50'000 Ethiopian Birr for month. So they told me that I will also have a training in China, so I will go to China, have a pocket money, 8 months, two months of vacation and I will come back. The guy insisted very much. And at that time I was in the full time preaching activity, I haven't finished my plan, so I didn't accept it. Even if I was, I wouldn't have accepted it, because it limits the amount of contact you will have. You will be only in the company, you will be only in the factory. You don't have any chance to go out and meet more people. And some kind of work give you also the opportunity to meet those who are in a business. So, sometimes the smartness of the person, who is engaged in this meeting, works, matters also. And it comes down to how much you are willing to work. I limit myself sometimes, willingly.*

(sch) Because there is more work available that you can deliver?

(tes) *No, I have to give time for my preaching and my study of the bible and my congregation. Because of that I limit myself. Otherwise I don't want to give up all this, because the most important thing is my relationship with Jehova. But still there are ways...*

(sch) But what would you say, as a freelancer now, in average, how much do you make in a month?

(tes) *I mean sometimes more than 20'000, sometimes even more. The more I limit myself; it will be less. It could be nearly 50'000 if I had to open a company, the proposal, the /.../, everything I have to do, it's a lot of work, so I ask them just once. It's not fixed, but it depends.*

(sch) What would you say, the full time Chinese translator working for Chinese clients and companies, how much can he make?

(tes) I mean if I go to a Chinese company I will just ask them for about 20'000 after tax. So that I need. If not, I won't accept it. So that's the least amount that I need. Others, 10'000 or just 15'000, it depends to their skill and language level.

(sch) And the Chinese are willing to pay that?

(tes) Yes.

(sch) I guess there is a high demand also for translators.

(tes) Yes and also if they believe that you can do the job and if they can trust you and if you are a good person, they will give you the job. Because these are hard things to find: Skilled, Chinese speaking and a good person. Some of them have the skills and the Chinese, but not a good personality. And some have only the personality and language, but no good skills. And some people have the personality and the skills, but no good language. So if you have the three at the same time, they will be willing to pay.

(sch) What would you say is the number of Ethiopians that speak Chinese now and does it increase a lot?

(tes) Of course, it is increasing. I suspect, more than 500 hundred towards 1000.

(sch) In Addis?

(tes) In Ethiopia, probably. Or even more than a thousand. I mean I only know about 200 of them. So...

(sch) I am interested in what your idea on this is: I had this feeling that the translator for the Chinese has quite a lot of power in this relation between the Chinese and Ethiopian side. He is really... Or let's put it in another way: My impression was that a lot of Chinese are completely depend on their translator or someone who understands their situation and of course their language. It seems that there comes a lot of power also with that situation.

(tes) That is very true! The translator has a big power, as he speaks both languages. And everything he says will be taken as a reference. And the thing is, the translators are somehow also pushed by the Chinese. And when he has the personality, he can also push the Chinese, since he speaks the language, they will be in a position to respect him. As a translator that's what I noticed. I don't accept the Chinese to push the Ethiopian people and I don't like when the Ethiopians become lazier. I also don't like it. I try to appear as a human there. Not as an Ethiopian, not as a Chinese, but as a human. So that's a thing they have in common obviously. So why don't you do this (...) because this is the Ethiopian culture. And if the Ethiopians are not in a favorable way, I will tell them then what are you working here. So, sometimes the translator wants to be liked by the Chinese, you know he sometimes tries to flatter with the Chinese and be on the Chinese side, thinking he will get more advantage. So, in the beginning the Chinese might like him, but when the time comes, no, you are off the game. Because the Ethiopians will no longer listen to what he is saying, because they know he is not the right person. But you have to be firm, a man of action in the middle. Otherwise you will be a puppet for the Chinese. So, that's what I noticed in some other places.

(sch) You mentioned a good point, that also came into my mind. Its somehow really tricky when it comes to the loyalty in the position as a translator. You are paid by them, in a contract with them and you want to make them succeed. On the other side you are also an Ethiopian and there is some kind of relation to the workers, I guess. I met some labourers who said that they think that the translator is much more on the Chinese side and somehow really profit from their position.

(tes) Obviously, obviously. Even the translators you might listen to them that the Chinese are bad, they are like that, they make us do this and do this... I mean, just talking and doing is two other things. And sometimes action speaks louder than voice. But the way they act, it looks that they are favoring the Chinese. Sometimes... I was in a position to make favor for the Chinese and there was a time I was in the favor of the Ethiopians. If I believe the Chinese are wrong, whether they pay me a lot or not, I will not definitely take side for them. But I will do the translation only. If I am not happy, I just simply sit down and say: this is what he said, this is what she said. I will do this. But you know after they go I will say to them you are not right, you are taking advantage of them or something. And sometimes they make me out of this work. When they know your personality, especially the two Chinese person that I told you. They knew my personality already so they know when to ask me to translate and when not to ask me to translate. so you have to be, in the first time, you have to be very firm in the first time, to let them know that there are priorities. It's not them it's not the Ethiopians, but you have a personality that you should... you have a conscious you should follow. Otherwise I noticed that.

(sch) You would say you don't come into a situation of a real dilemma, standing in between the two sides?

(tes) When I do translations, I try to be neutral. I am not perfect, I might did it, but I don't remember doing it against my conscious. I never remember doing that. But what I do is when the Chinese speak I translate and I ask the Ethiopians, this is your chance to speak, because I won't be here, because I am there as a freelancer, right. So if you speak, speak. they will tell me and I will translate to them. And sometimes when the Chinese try to /cover it down/ I try to explain to them, in having their mentality in mind. That's what I do, if I have to sometimes push the Chinese, I will push them. So, I mean, they are human for me. And if you really see them as a human, they will respect you. I mean, you are not a puppet, they will respect you.

(sch) I can very well imagine that you handle these situations in a way that...

(tes) And sometimes, as I told you, I have to water down some translations not to offend people. The Ethiopians might use the wrong words and the Chinese might use the wrong words. I don't translate literally, I just simply translate what they want to say or the meaning that will convey. So for example if they say you are stupid (laughter), I would say that you are not understanding the situation. You know just in a nice way. That I do purposely, I don't want to be the person that puts gas on the fire. So sometimes I do that, having in mind to have peace.

(sch) Some workers were telling me, you know, one thing was that they did not really had access to the translator whenever they had something to say, but the translator was just not willing to deal with them. That's of course a completely different situation than what you have explained.

(tes) Well actually, sometimes... there were situations that happened to me. I mean, they sometimes make it very personal the workers. You are there as a professional translator, trying to translate the work. During the Chinese presence I translate for them. But sometimes thinking you are translating for the them, they might do every small details into translation. So at that time I say, why don't you use your mind, you got already the training, just do this and do this. If you translate every detail, that means you won't be in a position to work. Because as a translator you don't only have a responsibility for translation, you might be a supervisor also. Or you might handle some situations at the government office. I mean me in

my case I do graphic designing as well, to prepare some documents. And sometimes the translation work they want directly to the Chinese, but this is not practical because they have the way they do the work. They have the bosses, the Chinese, and you have the managers and HR and you have the supervisors and the workers. Whenever the workers have a problem, they have to talk with the supervisor, not directly to you.

(sch) And the supervisors are also mainly Ethiopians?

(tes) Ethiopians, yes. So they tell to the supervisors. If it's something they can't handle, they will bring it to the HR or the managers. And if they can't handle because of the company policy, if they can't handle the situation, then they will bring it to the translator. And the translator will translate it to the Chinese people. (...) Sometimes the Ethiopians might not understand this procedure, so they want directly to meet the Chinese person to talking with him. So they want to go through you. And whenever you are doing that, you are doing against this procedure. You know that the Chinese won't be pleased with that. So you have to somehow follow the company procedure. You understood the situation, right? (...) Whenever there is a problem they call me, I never work as a permanent, you know. But the places I have worked, as a permanent place, I always translated for the Ethiopians and the Chinese and I always translated literally for them. So there was a flow of understanding between them. But its small, you know, tens of workers. But you can imagine hundreds of workers in a factory, its not easy to translate to a hundred people.

(sch) So you really stand in front of hundred people and literally speak to the whole group?

(tes) Yes, the Chinese speak and you stand in front of the hundred people. Then you translate among them you ask them to raise a question, you translate. That I don't refuse, you can ask any question even if it is a weird question. But sometimes they want you to do it personally, if they want to have a leave. (...)

(sch) And for how long are you doing this now already?

(tes) I mean, this company has been established for two years already.

(sch) No just in general, translating.

(tes) Four years now.

(sch) And what are your plans for the future?

(tes) I want to continue as a freelance. And after I have settled, I want to get back to the full time preaching service. Because that's what I wanted in life, more than work. So I still can support myself by working, but I want my main goal in life to be the preaching activity.

(sch) And how successful is that with the Chinese?

(tes) Well you preach to them, because our work is twofold: Warning and gathering. So you tell them about gods kingdom, that gods kingdom will come, it will destroy the wicked people, those who are doing righteousness and living according to gods standards will be in a position to be citizens under gods kingdom. So you telling them, just giving them a warning. It's up to them to accept it or not. The second job is gathering. Starting a bible study with them. I have some bible studies, in Chinese. They study, they make progress and they become worshippers. And some of them they start here and they continue wherever they go in China or in other countries and they become our brothers and sisters. So even if you might not see the fruit here, its bearing fruits wherever they are going. And also, the fact we are preaching this work because also one of the prophecies in the bible is preaching will be done in the whole earth. So if they go to another country they may say, I met JW in Ethiopia, I met JW in South Africa...

Of course, we are doing it worldwide, so this is also a witness. This work is very important, and god wants them to make changes, so he is making it preach. I want this to be my main goal in life, still is, but I want to go back to my full-time service.

(sch) And if you approach them and contact them, is it mainly their first contact with the bible?

(tes) Many of them, yes. I mean there are some who read the bible, there are some who know Christianity from books. But there are some who never saw JW before, many of them. And I met some of them that said they met JW in other African countries. Most of them they don't, I am just telling them for the first time. (...)

(sch) And what about going to China yourself?

(tes) I will definitely go (laughter). Of course, I have a lot of friends there already, those who promised that they will accept me if I go. So, I will definitely... But I never processed my passport, I never thought that I am going abroad. But now I will do it.

(sch) And when will that be, still this year?

(tes) Yes, I mean its a matter of time, in one day or two you can do it. I will do it this year, to process my passport to go to China in one year or two.

(sch) Nice, that must be a great experience.

Transcript 3

Efrem

living the “Chinese dream”

Interviewee: Efrem (efr)

Age: 25

Function / occupation: Student at the South China normal university in Guangzhou, businessman, trader

Interviewer: Samuel Schlaefli (sch)

Date: 14.02.2019

Context / Location: I was introduced to Efrem through an Ethiopian gemstone trader that I got to know on the China Market. Efrem invites me for lunch to “Kategna”, an upmarket, traditional Ethiopian restaurant in the Bole district in Addis Ababa. People from nearby banks, from insurance and trading companies and other service providers come here for lunch. After lunch, we go to the stylish “Tomocca” café close by to shift our lively conversation into a more formal interview.

Meaning of indications:

(...): repetitions or passages without any interest in regards of my research question

...: Pauses and unfinished sentences

/lap/: not clear what was meant or how it is written

/.../ not understood

(sch) So it would be great if you could recount again a little bit. How you came up with this idea to go and study in China?

(efr) You know, like I told you, my family are doing business. Yeah. They're doing business like they were from grade eleven. My older sister, she gets pregnant. Then they start, it's like they got struggled, you know, to buy a house. How to survive, how to live. So, they start doing some business. Young business and like I told you, from grade one to until now they still doing that business and I saw it every day and they maybe they would take from third part or fourth part of import. So that's what makes me like a businessman. And in the weekend, Saturday and Sunday, even Sunday until lunch time, our shop is open. Because mostly all of them are free on Sunday, so they will purchase the goods, raw material to do traditional clothes on Sunday. I get good /.../. And I know about money.

(sch) So you learned it just through working together with your father? Just being in the shop, learning from him?

(efr) Yeah. Even I remember from grade seven from, uh, from when I was like nine, seven or eight years old, they will put me out outside the shop and they say when someone comes you need to say no because I can't communicate on that time. I can't say it. They will treat me or something. So, I had that experience and like I told you, my sister went to USA. When we get

older that time, I don't like US or European countries. Because if I were to go there, I can't do my business. What I wanted to experience for my family is buying, selling, trading business. Not like salary business. So, my sister, she graduates her masters in the US, she come back and she told me she want to take me to the US. But I didn't accept it. I said, no, I want to go to China because I study at the same time I can help my family and I can import anything. And I want to experience high rise building. Like I told you, I studied architecture. So, even my family, they cry, you know, I didn't tell them when I forced my scholarship and when I get the visa, I went home and said, I'm going to China next week for a scholarship. They got mad, you know, because even they for my older sister, they think they think that I'm older. They think her like the younger, you know, because I handle everything. When they ask me something, I'll do it first. That is the situation why I'm going to go and try China, and I know that I will be successful because, you know, from young age even from baby age, I get good experience on how to do things. My father is my experience and my teacher. He's even my best friend. He's my best friend. Really? When I was grade eleven, he said where is your girlfriend. /.../

(sch) But what they do know. When you make that decision to go to China, what did you know about China? Did you have friends already who were in China? Did you get to know Chinese here in Addis Ababa? Or what did you know already?

(efr) *First time, yeah. You know what's happened? One of my friends, he is my roommate in university. He didn't tell me anything. And he gets scholarship to the US. He said, I'm leaving today. He didn't tell me anything when he is processing. Are you sure are you leaving? Yeah. If you can, don't call me don't text me. Start from today. I said you are not my friend because you know we slept together. But he didn't tell me anything. He said I'm leaving today. Are you sure? Yeah. Then. Also, the second friend, he went like this. We were six in one room and one of my family came. Why don't we go to China after we finish this year? I said, are you sure you want to go China? Yeah. And you know why? I have many friends that studied in China, even they did their bachelor. And they continue their master's*

(sch) Like friends here from Addis Ababa?

(efr) *From Addis Ababa. We studied high school together. But I don't, I don't mind to go outside of Ethiopia. Then I start thinking about it. I called to my friend in China. Is there any opportunity to come there? Yeah, I know that you are a businessman. You'll be successful, he said. I swear to God you will be the most successful. He told me that.*

(sch) So you already had a friend in China?

(efr) *I have many friends out there.*

(sch) You mean Ethiopian friends?

(efr) *Yeah, I had many friends. We studied here in Addis Ababa university. But the when they finished grade 12, they went to China. Even one of my friends' father, you know, he trusts me and he like my activity, you know? I am a student and at the same time helping my father and most of my friends. They only know about the study. You know, they don't know anything about life in the business. So that that's one friend of my father, he wants to invest in both of us who went to China. He had a position in the government. And my father said, no, I want to teach my son here. So you don't need to go. And I say, OK. Then after that, I start the process. I finished the process for the scholarship within three weeks, within three weeks.*

(sch) So it was easy to get a scholarship in China?

(efr) *Yeah, then I make it business for one year. You know, I I've become agents for the university, and I bring like 20 Ethiopians. And I charged them like 1000 dollar for one.*

(sch) You charged the university?

(efr) I charged the students, the student from Ethiopia one thousand dollar. Even the university would give me 10 percent commission from the tuition. So for two years, I didn't pay anything from the dollars of admission I get I pay for two years the tuition fee.

(sch) At which university was this?

(efr) The first university. Fujian Agriculture and Forestry University. It's in Zhejiang province, you know, in China, there are many... Guangdong, Hubei. Beijing is in Hubei, Zhejiang Province, Hangzhou. That was my is my... like 30 minutes by bullet train. And it was a nice environment for study. But there is no business.

(sch) But how was it in the beginning? Can you still remind when you first came there? I mean, you couldn't speak the language. Everything was new. How was it to start in China?

(efr) That's my first time. I got big sickness; you know. I felt that. Oh, my God. I'm sick because I sleep daytime and nighttime, I sleep, because until we start class, processing visa, resident visa, medical checkup for this process I take one month before starting the university in China. That time it seems like I'm sick because every day, you know, when I am in Ethiopia for almost ten years and still now I sleep maximum seven hours per day. But in that time, I didn't do anything. I don't like Facebook Messenger chatting because I don't have that when I were there. I will study and work. I will be busy in family time. I don't like texting message. I don't like social matters, but on that time, I become addicted to social because I had free time. Then I am posting on Facebook if anyone want to come to China for a scholarship, contact me on WhatsApp on this number and I got like hundreds. From hundreds I filtered like 20.

(sch) Because there are many, many young people here in Ethiopia that want to go to China?

(efr) Yeah, I mean I still know my customers... my customers, they asked me to recommend in which university is good for teaching my son, my baby or something like this. Then I recommend them and I process for them. This time I'm busy, so I will go for one agent and I will take 50 percent commission something like this.

(sch) And how important was it when you decided to go to China? You know, how important was it that there are more and more Chinese coming to Ethiopia during your time at Addis Ababa university. I think the number of Chinese here increased quite a lot. How important was it or did you see a certain opportunity by the increasing numbers of Chinese people?

(efr) Yeah. You know, these days, it's like it, it's like. You know, this is like food chain, right? You know food chain, right? Some animals... if the lion doesn't have food, he will die. Like in the elementary city there is food chain. If /.../ can get something to eat, he will die. These days China and Ethiopia it's like that. because these days you see, like, I think maybe half million or one million Chinese, half million, minimum half million Chinese are living in Ethiopia these days. So these Chinese they need translators, there is someone to know the Chinese culture. So this time we were paid fair salaries, this time. Because I can translate for them, I have profession. My salary will be two three times if I can drive also; for drive they would pay me. So I have many good advantages. Even many, many companies come to students that have studied in China, they introduce the country. They would ask you what is the advantage to go to the country; they will ask you like this. So you explain for them. I think it's good advantage.

(sch) So you saw many opportunities before you went studying in China. Much more than you saw by studying in the U.S.?

(efr) Yeah. Because if I were in the U.S., maybe I would go to one company. They would pay me some per hour some salary, you know. They will use my time and my knowledge, you know. So I can't access everywhere like China. But now I have free time, you know. I'll be

someone I will pay them. But for everything, I would be salary plus commission, not only salary, because they use their time to do it for me something. Maybe I'll call for one Chinese, and I'm looking for these Highland motors. I need one million of this, so the quality. This, this, this, the labelling like this. I will give them the specification when she gets me the exact company before I pay them, I will go and visit because it will be a big amount, you know. After we sign an agreement, I will pay for her commission also. 10 percent from net profit, I will share 10 percent.

(sch) So now your main business is really like bringing Ethiopian clients and Chinese vendors together?

(efr) Yeah, even if anyone ask me, I have one million, two million Birr. I want to do something. Then I would advise them, I have this business as we come together. The profit margins like this, you can take 10 percent and I can take 10 percent. If they agree they would sign agreement. They will give me the Birr. I will import it and have market, you know. So I would distribute after we finished, we would share the profits. Maybe we will sign one year agreements or six months. So it's good.

(sch) How difficult was it in the beginning in China? How were you received by the Chinese people? Was it hard to get in contact with them, to make friends there?

(efr) You know, in the city, they don't know Africans, you know. When they saw another nation, another culture, they will get surprised, they will take pictures, they will take pictures and selfies when you are there. Yeah, and the children they run away. Even the big guys. Like: Hello. Can you show me where can I buy this one? They say like they don't want to listen to you because they can't speak and they can't listen. No, they run away. /.../ Everyone is busy and dictating on their mobile. WeChat, you know, everyone is using mobiles.

(sch) But did you did you also feel some racism or that...

(efr) Sometimes. For me, you know. If we'll understand each other, you can describe this is racism. This is something they fear, something ... but, we don't understand even. When I ask him, someone who don't want to talk to me. There is two options. The first thing that would be racism. The second thing you don't understand. So you fear, you know, he would be to afraid, to talk to you. These are the options that I'm thinking. All the time when they don't accept me, this is the reality, what I'm thinking.

(sch) But it got easier... I mean, you learned Chinese at the school then. Did it become much easier to get in contact with them when you spoke the language?

(efr) Yeah, yeah, yeah. Even if you say 'ni hao' and if you say hello, they will give you a different perspective if you speak Chinese. Then they are number one, they would understand. They are good, I really like them. They have good culture; they have good culture. But the culture of only working is what I like from them. Personality and relationships, that's not good. You know, they have some racism. I think they are all afraid. But life is life. If they love you tonight, everything is easy.

(sch) But still, still now your think, you have some disadvantages being an African in China compared to your Chinese friends. Or do you feel well received now?

(efr) For me you know, everything was good. You know, the situation and everything was good. The challenge for me was good.

(sch) And now what would you say, how many how many Chinese friends do you have?

(efr) Thousands. But I maybe only know hundreds or a hundred or so.

(sch) But you said those are mainly like business friends. Or are they really also personal friends?
(efr) *Personal friends, maybe 10, 20. We only meet to exchange experiences. You know, we exchange African and China experience and even before one year, we open one coffee shop. I have coffee shop in China, in Guangzhou. And I open with my best friend? And I bring this experience and I'm selling Tomoca brand coffee and the machine, this machine is from Italy. I bought this same, the owner, she's my friend. Yeah. Roasted. Because they want to smell. So we roast. Most of the products we sell is grinded one. Because that's when it takes time. And in China, you know, time is gold, maybe diamond (laughter).*

(sch) And did you experience a lot of interest from Chinese people in Africa and in Ethiopia?
(efr) *Yeah. You know, I went to open some institutes and the teacher would be Chinese specially, like electricity, sanitary and like techniques of constructions. Not like university. Something like four human resources. Maybe this construction, we'll have like 50 or hundreds of human resources. From that maybe only 10 or 20, they have studied engineering or something. But the others work one day for 100 or 200 Birr. You will manage them and they will. But they don't have that talent to do what they're doing. They experience, you know. They experience everything, the Chinese. The advantage is, I think the main advantage is population. You know, they have too much population. That's the first. The second: They were so poor, you know, they were so poor and everyone working hard. Sometimes they are not smart. They're not smart, they are hard workers. /.../*

(sch) And you would consider yourself as a smart worker?
(efr) *No I would not consider. I want to take ideas from better than me. there are some smart and good. From Ali Baba I studied many things, you know. Ali Baba, I want to apply in Ethiopia in the future. I want to have my own online marketing and website in the future. (...)*

(sch) So you think you can learn a lot also by being in China, just by observing...? Yes, yes, even we are establishing like online payments, we don't have a land payment.
(efr) *I mean, mobile banking, mobile banking. But, you know, in China, my phone is off. You know, WeChat. Yeah. And WeChat is our wallets. You can receive money from your friends. That's a good thing. You can link your bank accounts, maybe three, four bank accounts you can link. You can pay direct from your bank. The other thing WeChat has its own... you can find hotels nearby and taxi, everything, and packages on WeChat. You can buy flight tickets and you can top up mobile cards. (...)*

(sch) Could you imagine to stay.... so for how long are you now already in China?
(efr) *Three and half, three and a half years.*

(sch) And you came back to Ethiopia every year or once a year?
(efr) *Every two or three months. Because, you know, the market is like, you need to check here. I will get order here and I will purchase. It's like connected business.*

(sch) But how do you make it with the school? I mean, you have to attend courses.
(efr) *Yeah, yeah. But when I come every three months or two months, I will come for two, three days, maximum four days. If I will to stay four days, I will miss one class. So I would e-mail them or something like this. Because for the import, I need to come and sign for the bank.*

(sch) And could you imagine to stay longer in China? Maybe to live in China for the future.

(efr) *No, I am done. I don't want to live there anymore. Maybe. Maybe then I will pay for rent apartment only six months from now. Six months. On September I will stop the contract. The contract to be finished in September, after that I will be 100 percent here. Maybe for some traveling for two weeks or so.*

(sch) And why? Why can't you imagine staying in China?

(efr) *You know I want to have my sustainable management and showroom, I already opened here, so I want to get more customers and you know, if you sign someone, he will not work like you. I don't want to lose my brand and my name, my company name, you know. I want to follow up.*

(sch) But you will work together with Chinese customers or deliverers a lot in the future, you think?

(efr) *Yeah! I have some agreements with the Chinese, import agreements. Like, I have one million dollar every year for a Chinese company.*

(sch) Products with the value of one million dollar that you import?

(efr) *Yeah, I signed a contract with the owner of the factory. One million dollar every year. He is one of my clients.*

(sch) What kind of products?

(efr) *Ceramic. They are doing here construction and they don't want to use the local ceramic. Because there is some standards, when they sign the agreements with the hotels and the real estates. So I will import for him for one million dollar and I will charge him 15 percent. I have one Chinese friend; he is a commission agent. He contacted me and the owner of that ceramic factory. So I will get 12 percent. Also, today in the morning I signed an agreement. There is one plastic packaging... this one, they are doing this one (shows a plastic cover). So for them they asked me, every month 50'000 US. They give me quotation... how much they will give me and I said, I will give them appointment after one week. Let me do my calculation and see if its profitable.*

(sch) And these are Chinese people?

(efr) *No, this one is Ethiopian. They have plastic factory, but there is shortage of currency, you know. If you ask the bank for dollars, these days it's not easy. They need raw materials, you know. If the factory cannot get the raw materials... they have warehouse, salary, factory, many things. these days I am only thinking about the management. I have many markets, but the management is hard, you know. You need to have someone you trust in and who works like you. Before I realise that, I will go to another business, because this one is already sustainable.*

(sch) But you have your business partners now in China, so you don't need to be there all the time?

(efr) *Like I told you, this year, if I will finish everything my managing and business strategy, until next year I don't want to work hard. I want to travel and make new experience and I want to have my own products; you know. This Tomocca (the coffee brand), they have like more than seven branches in Addis. They also have in Tokyo, Japan. I think she has in Sweden or something.*

(sch) So, that's the thing that you would like to do, like also expanding?

(efr) *Yeah, yeah, expand. But I don't want to expand anymore foreign, you know. Maybe China, because that's my experience. In china I know the business strategy, I have some partners. You know, life is short. I am thinking /.../ with 60.*

(sch) How old are you now?

(efr) *I am 25. I want to work until 40. I want only to travel and get rest and manage.*

(sch) So even when you are travelling you would work?

(efr) *From every travel I would take stones (precious minerals). That stone will cover my expense and that time I am travelling I get many experiences.*

(sch) But your main interest in travelling would be what? Just to discover different cultures or to see different places?

(efr) *The main thing what makes me happy is travelling, experiencing new things.*

(sch) So you were travelling in China as well?

(efr) *Yeah, almost 12, 13 cities. Within 12 days I travelled 8 cities. I take two of my uncles and they invest like 500'000 dollar and they asked me: What can we do with this money by investing this money? They sold one garment like two million dollars for a style company. I said, I have many things. Are you sure? Yeah. Can you show us? Yeah. I gave them proposals. They saw and were interested and they wanted to visit the factories. I take them to factories and now we are doing. The business goes on. /.../*

(sch) Nowadays would you say it was the best decision you could ever do to go and study in China?

(efr) *Yeah, a hundred percent. For me hundred percent. But there are some students they are lazy, they use drugs and they drink too much. That students, some are in prison and some they even come here after graduating and taking salaries, you know. The main thing is not for anyone to go to China. You need to have hobby, you need to have the behavior of how you grew up, maybe the family environment, your living environment.*

(sch) So you mean some people get lost in China? Some Ethiopians forget about their culture, their family...

(efr) *Yeah, they forget and take drugs. They try to transport Khat, you know Khat, right? And in China if they catch you dealing with Khat or drugs, they will kill you.*

(sch) In China, they are very strict, yes.

(efr) *For khat they will put you in jail for 15 years, something like this. Ok, I think the time is gone.*

(sch) Just one last question: You had a scholarship. China was paying some money that you could study in China. What do you think is the interest of China, that they just pay young men from Ethiopia to come to China and to study?

(efr) *Why they give you scholarship? The main thing, you know is, they want to control the world market, you know. So they will give scholarship... for Pakistan they give too much scholarship for Pakistan, for India, for Zambia, for Uganda for Tanzania, Kenia, Sudan. Nigeria these days, 50 percent they will not accept. Most of the universities will not accept. Like 70 percent of the universities will not accept Nigerians. Because they are dealing drugs, they are in a blacklist. So what I understand from this day is, they are giving scholarships for*

developing countries. So when more students coming, their families, their friends want to come and visit them. At the same time, they will see the market. So the business relationship and the country relationship becomes good and gets more and more, you know. When they give scholarships to more population, the business opportunity will increase. I think before six, five years, maximum seven years, in Ethiopia starts rumor about China, they give scholarships. Before four years, minimum 10'000, 20'000 students went to China by scholarships.

(sch) How many?

(efr) *10'000, 20'000 students by scholarships.*

(sch) Four years ago?

(efr) *Three four years ago. Because you know, like I have told you, I take 20 students. So someone who has this kind of business mind, they open agency and they are doing about consulting and scholarship. They take more students to China.*

(sch) But you would say the main interest of China is...

(efr) *To control the market.*

(sch) And to make close ties with people from African countries...

(efr) *African countries and all developing countries. That's the main target. Because you know, when you give visa for developing countries you must also think your country will get some problems. They are developing countries, maybe they will teach your people bad things. Like I told you, they gave scholarship to Nigerians. Then they come and sell drugs for their countries. China they are big, they are rich these days. In economy they are good. So that's the main thing they give scholarship is to control the market. And social relations, that's the main thing.*

(sch) You would say the Ethiopians they profit as much as the Chinese do?

(efr) *The Ethiopians? Yeah, the Ethiopians get much /.../ for sure. Because if China don't have partnerships or Ethiopian shareholders, they can do nothing. Also, when it comes to one country, you need to have safety, the main thing is safety. You need to have someone that tells about security about everything, how it works. About rule and regulations, what the government will look.*

(sch) So they are also dependent on having these relations with people from Ethiopia?

(efr) *Yeah, to do business here.*

Transcript 4

Abdu

disillusioned and struggling

Interviewee: Abdu (abd)

Translator: Hachalu (hal)

Age: around 25

Function / occupation: Driver for “China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation” (CCECC) on the Aysha-Dewele construction site

Interviewer: Samuel Schlaefli (sch)

Date: 27.01.2019

Context / Location: I met Abdu through Ras, a young artist that I befriended and frequently visited in his studio in the Alliance Française during my stay in Dire Dawa. The interview took place in Ras’ studio. Abdus condition for taking time to speak to me about his experiences working for a Chinese company, was a bag of khat. He looked very tired and his face had an unhealthy color. Hachalu, another friend of Ras, helped me with the translation, as Abdu does not speak any English. All answers were given in Amharic and translated to me by Hachalu.

Meaning of indications:

(...): repetitions or passages without any interest in regards of my research question

...: Pauses and unfinished sentences

/lap/: not clear what was meant or how it is written

/.../ not understood

(sch) It would be good if you could first ask him where he is working, what’s the companies name, what he is doing there and for how long he is already there?

(hal) He said he is working on a site called Aysha – Dewele. They asked for one-year experience in driving. and he is working there for one year and three months.

(sch) Maybe you ask him what his main activities are as a driver?

(hal) There are too many drivers, we are a lot. We have tasks to do, we have managers and leaders, they are Chinese. And we work for them, they send us to buy tools and good, they send us to the city. And to move them around the station and the site. And let them get to where they want. And we just do what they ask us to do as a driver. If they need a car, we are available at any time

(sch) That’s a construction site where you work, on the countryside?

(hal) From Dire Dawa the site is 95 kilometers. It’s a desert and it’s hard to live, its hotty. We just stay right there, we don’t know how they manage us, we don’t know when we come to the city. We wait and follow their commands. It starts at 95 km from Dire Dawa and it extends to 150km to Dire Dawa.

(sch) And what do they do there? Do they construct roads?

(hal) He is working on a road.

(sch) And does he live there in a camp and is permanently on the site?

(hal) Yes, they have a camp to stay right there and they provide them food. But it's not satisfactory.

(sch) So he only comes back on weekends? Or how does it go until he sees his family and friends?

(hal) He said, if they need to come to Dire Dawa three times in a day, we do it. If they need the money from the bank, we come. We just follow their commands, if they want to stay us for 10 or 15 days there, we do it. We just follow their commands.

(sch) So he does not have a fixed time schedule, you know like five days in a week or something like that?

(hal) No he does not have any...

(sch) But does he have a fixed contract with the Chinese?

(hal) When first they employ us, they don't give us a contract, just a chance to drive. We need to work so we give that chance and work. After we work for three months, they give us a contract, for some of us. But even if they pay us our wage, our fee they pay us by cash and the contract is some kind of confuse. If I want to leave the company, they will not give me money because of the contract. (...) But if they don't want to do work with you, they can terminate you at any time. That's the kind of contract we have.

(sch) And how often do they get paid?

(hal) They pay us by month.

(sch) And how much do they pay?

(hal) He just said we get paid 6000; 200 per day. But they don't pay us overtime and its just like a daily labourer job. It's like a labourer job, they don't have any fixed overtime and our wage and fee is not enough. To live in the desert, to work in the desert, 200 is not enough.

(sch) But to me it seems, I spoke with other people and they told me that they earn 2000 Birr / month. So, it seems to be quite a high salary.

(hal) He says that working as a driver in the desert, 6000 is little money. Because if I drive taxi in a town, I get more money. And the hardest thing on the job is, you may come to Dire Dawa two or three times a day, you don't know what to do, you are in the desert all time. So, it does not seem to be enough for me. And his car is rented by the private sector (...).

(sch) May you could talk a little bit about the living conditions in the camp? If he could explain a little bit how it looks like, how the infrastructure is, how many people live there?

(hal) The camp is in this size of the room [around 10m x 3m], the roof – I don't know how to call it in English [shows it to me – corrugated iron sheets]. The houses get constructed by that, it's very hotty, it's in the desert. We might be 15 or 17, minimum 10. But it can be 15 or 17 at the size of this room. The food is not satisfying, it's a desert. The bad and the toilet is not safe and clean. And the employees, too many, at the camp, when the project get started...First when we started the project, he guesses there were around 450 employees. But when the government asked the project to be finished faster, they added some to around 600. After the project is in the final phase, the number of workers get lower and lower.

(sch) But he means like 600 Ethiopian workers?

(hal) *Daily labourers, and they are maybe engineers, they are drivers, they are cleaners, technicians, there are too many kind of employees. As you know road projects need a lot of resource.*

(sch) And they all live there? There are many of these huts?

(hal) *He said that our camp, and the consultants, the engineers and the Chinese camp are different. The workers, labourers and drivers live together. And the others on the higher level got their own camp.*

(sch) Also Ethiopians, like Ethiopian engineers?

(hal) *Of course!*

(sch) And they are together with the Chinese?

(hal) *They are separated, Ethiopians and Chinese they don't live together. But the infrastructure in their camp is more similar than ours.*

(sch) So there is also a difference between the camps of the higher skilled Ethiopians and the daily laborers?

(hal) *Yes, yes, if you are an Ethiopian engineer and labourer, you don't have the same camp. (...)*

(sch) How do they live and sleep there?

(hal) *They have foams on the floor and they sleep on the foams, like 17 people. And as I have told you it's very hotty, not good to live. They have diseases, at any time they can have diseases. As I told you the food is not healthy. We don't want to eat it. Because of the food we go out and buy the food to eat it because it's not ok. But because the area is so remote there are not any kind of hotels and restaurants. Even the food that you buy is not too healthy. And it's hard to live there.*

(sch) What kind of food they get? And how many times a day?

(hal) *As all Ethiopians, we eat Ethiopian food. Shiro and injera and potato.*

(sch) But then they have Ethiopian cooks that cook Ethiopian food?

(hal) *Yes, yes.*

(sch) But he is not happy with the quality of the food?

(hal) *Yes, because the number are too many there. And when you prepare the food at large scale the quality is may not comfortable for you. And then they prefer to eat outside.*

(sch) May you ask if there is electricity, internet and water supply there?

(hal) *If you ask me personally for the internet, I don't use it commonly, but they don't provide any kind of internet for us. (...) But when you talk about the phone network it's really hard because its remote. If you go there it's very hard to get someone right there. And the electricity is constant, it's always online. But when you come to the water, we always buy packed water. We don't drink from the pipeline.*

(sch) And they have to buy it from their own money.

(hal) Yes, yes.

(sch) He mentioned some diseases before. Could he say if he got sick himself or what kind of diseases occurred during the time he was there?

(hal) There are too many diseases. There are bacterial diseases because things are not too clean for living, the rooms are not really clean and you live together. And the malaria is common in that area. And you may get the water poison. (...) If you lose weight or if you get sick or have an accident, even the first aid is not ok and good. Very poor. There is not any health station around the site. So we have to take any people who got sick or had accident we have to drive them to Dire Dawa to have a health station or hospital. And it's an additional job for us. (...) And he mentioned, even if you got sick, they don't give you rest time, because they need you a lot.

(sch) And do the Chinese pay for medical treatment, if you have to bring somebody? Because I guess in the hospital you also have to pay.

(hal) If you get an accident on a job process, they get paid. If you get your hand crushed or something like that they pay. If you caught diseases like malaria or something like that, you pay by yourself.

(sch) Did he get sick himself already?

(hal) Everybody got sick. I lost weight and I am not ok. I get sick constantly and it's not ok for me. And he told me that he get forced to stop the job because of this.

(sch) To start the job?

(hal) To stop, he wants to stop the job.

(sch) Because of his health?

(hal) Because of his health, because of his financial status.... Every question you ask me, when I ask him, he needs to stop the job, but he has not any choice. or opportunities to work. He is looking for that. As soon he gets another job he is gone. And so many friends stopped the job. (...) Even there are scorpions and snakes where he works.

(sch) Do they have any malaria nets where he works?

(hal) They give them the malaria protection kits. But it's hard to use because as I told you the houses are like this. And we have a foam to sleep, we can't really use it with so many people. So by default we don't use it, because it's not possible to use it. (...)

(sch) And how does he communicate with the Chinese?

(hal) Sometimes, if there are Ethiopian engineers or something like that, if there are Ethiopians they use them as a translator to speak. But most of them know a little Amharic to command: Let's go right here! Let's go right here! In Amharic

(sch) The Chinese?

(hal) Most of the Chinese talk a little Amharic. We don't have any language except of sign language. We use the sign language and a little Amharic. And they understand and we understand. Usually they command, they ask for something. We don't talk personal things or something like that. For that its very very possible to communicate poorly.

(sch) How is he treated by the Chinese that he is driving around or that he is working with? Does he feel fairly treated?

(hal) (Laughing together with Abdu) They are complicated, they are complicated. We don't know the decision, we don't know how they do. Even if they eat food, they don't invite you. In Ethiopia it's a very common thing to eat together. They don't eat with anybody, they eat alone. They do what they want, they are complicated. We don't know what to do, we just do our job. It's very very poor to communicate with them and to live with them. To socialize with them it's very hard, we don't understand them, they don't understand us. I may insult them; they may insult me. I don't know what they do. I'm just doing my job.

(sch) Has he any idea how the Chinese camps looks? I mean where the Chinese live.

(hal) Its exciting, it's very beautiful even architecturally. It's a nice place to live for them. And any Chinese has his own villa. He got a big huge area to manage alone.

(sch) Has he seen it with his own eyes?

(hal) Yes, yes. When he tries to pick them up at their house he goes right there. He may carry some goods for them....

(sch) What about the other Ethiopian camp for the engineers?

(hal) Its better from ours, but it's not like the Chinese. Sometimes he thinks they don't come to work, they have a luxury spot to live.

(sch) And the Ethiopian engineers, they are also separated and eat their own food? Or are they sometimes together and share time? Or is there no contact between the higher skilled and lower skilled Ethiopians?

(hal) The sociality or the working area of the Ethiopians is different, because of their job. The Chinese pressurize them to pressurize us. Because of their language and other things. So they work their job and we work our job. Even if we are Ethiopians, we are different. Even the high skilled are not happy right there. (...) When the Chinese say something to the high skilled Ethiopians, they come and say something to us. We don't communicate... The laborer's and the drivers are more integrated than the highly skilled Ethiopians.

(sch) So the highly skilled, would he say that they are more loyal to the Chinese than to the labourers?

(hal) They are integrated. (...) They have a job to do, Chinese may not know how things here in Dire Dawa or around... These Ethiopians they help them. They are very sensitive for the Chinese. When they come to them and talk /hebesha/ labour, Ethiopian labour, they go with them and put the pressure on the labourers, because they have integrated thing. Even if they eat together. So they are integrated with the Chinese more than us. Because they are linked with the money. Because they are highly skilled, in some cases they have good language to communicate with them. They know something, they are engineers. They are highly skilled people, they are consultants. They work together so they are so close with the Chinese people.

(sch) And most of them speak Chinese?

(hal) There is not a lot people who speak Chinese. In our camp there is one or two who speak Chinese. But they communicate in English. When they come to us they communicate in English.

(sch) So with the Chines they talk in English?

(hal) Yes.

(sch) And then they have two or three translators?

(hal) *Even, they are not constant. They come and go. Because they are very very wanted.*

(sch) What's the thing he hates most about his job?

(hal) *Generally from all the project, I hate because I get tired all the time. It's a desert, it's not ok. Sometimes when I come to Dire Dawa two or three time, I hate myself, I hate the job. I get tired a lot. But the income is not ok.*

(sch) Could he say something about how he got hired in the beginning?

(hal) *As I have told you, they put a vacancy sheet in Dire Dawa. And there are too many drivers who go there and they compare the drivers. They test each driver and they select them and give them a chance to drive. (...)*

(sch) When he applied for the job, did he have other expectations?

(hal) *When I go there, I had a driving license, I registered as a driver. But most of my friends registered as laborers. Our expectation was, it is nice money. Because in Ethiopia, especially in Dire Dawa, you can't get 6000 in one time. But the job maybe very very hard and difficult. But when you get 6000 in one time it means something in Dire Dawa. So I had a positive view back then. It may be good for me and an experience for me. So I took it as the best chance for me.*

(sch) So the money was attractive?

(hal) *Yes.*

(sch) And now would he be ready to earn less, maybe 4000, if he found a job at an Ethiopian company in Dire Dawa?

(hal) *Even with 3000 I can work if it is in the town. And in other places where there is no Chinese and the situation is ok I may work for 4000. But if it is in the town, I may work for 3000.*

(sch) And did he try to get another job?

(hal) *Yes, I try my best, I look for jobs all time. But in Ethiopia you can't get jobs easily. I am just trying.*

(sch) With the experience he had now, what is his basic picture of Chinese people that he has now?

(hal) *I hate them. After I leave my job, when I see them on the street, I may hit them. I feel that I have to hit them because the Chinese a couple of times have tried to attack me.*

(sch) Like really physically attack him?

(hal) *Yes, physically attack him. So, he hates them, he don't want to see them. (...) Now when he works with them he always insults them with the language they don't know. He hates them!*

(sch) And maybe a last question: The Chinese built many roads, a train line, an electricity system and many things. Does he think Ethiopia can profit from the things that China does here?

(hal) *He said, I don't know how the government and the Chinese contractors really communicate. I don't know it. They give us by the spoon, and they take from us by a bigger, bigger spoon, when it comes to the money. And when it comes to the buildings or the roads or something like that. Even the consultants say (...) that the roads don't have the quality that they talked before. They just pull the time, put the project late and late and late. And when you*

talk about the time issue, they just give you anything. Even if the quality is may low or big. you don't know this. But they make it late for a couple of times and then they give you anything they want. And he told me its corrupted by the consultants and the contractors itself. It is not understandable of how Chinese government and Ethiopian government working together.

(sch) May you ask him what kind of education he did?

(hal) *Until tenth grade, he graduated from high school and just has a driving license. And that's the basic thing they ask.*

(sch) And that's his first job now?

(hal) *No he had one year of experience before starting with the Chinese. Because they need one year of experience.*

(sch) And who he was working before, an Ethiopian company?

(hal) *He worked for an Ethiopian contractor called Debrezion Construction Company. (...)*

(sch) And how was that job compared to now?

(hal) *It was good. It was better than working with the Chinese. But the contract gets stopped, the project got closed, so I did not have work.*

(sch) And how much did he earn there?

(hal) *5000 per month.*

(sch) He was satisfied before.?

(hal) *Yes, he preferred it.*

7.2. Declaration on scientific probity



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A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "S. Schaller".