Asphalt Encounters

Chinese Road Building in Ethiopia

A Thesis by Miriam Driessen

Wolfson College

University of Oxford

In fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the subject of Anthropology

Supervised by Xiang Biao and David Zeitlyn

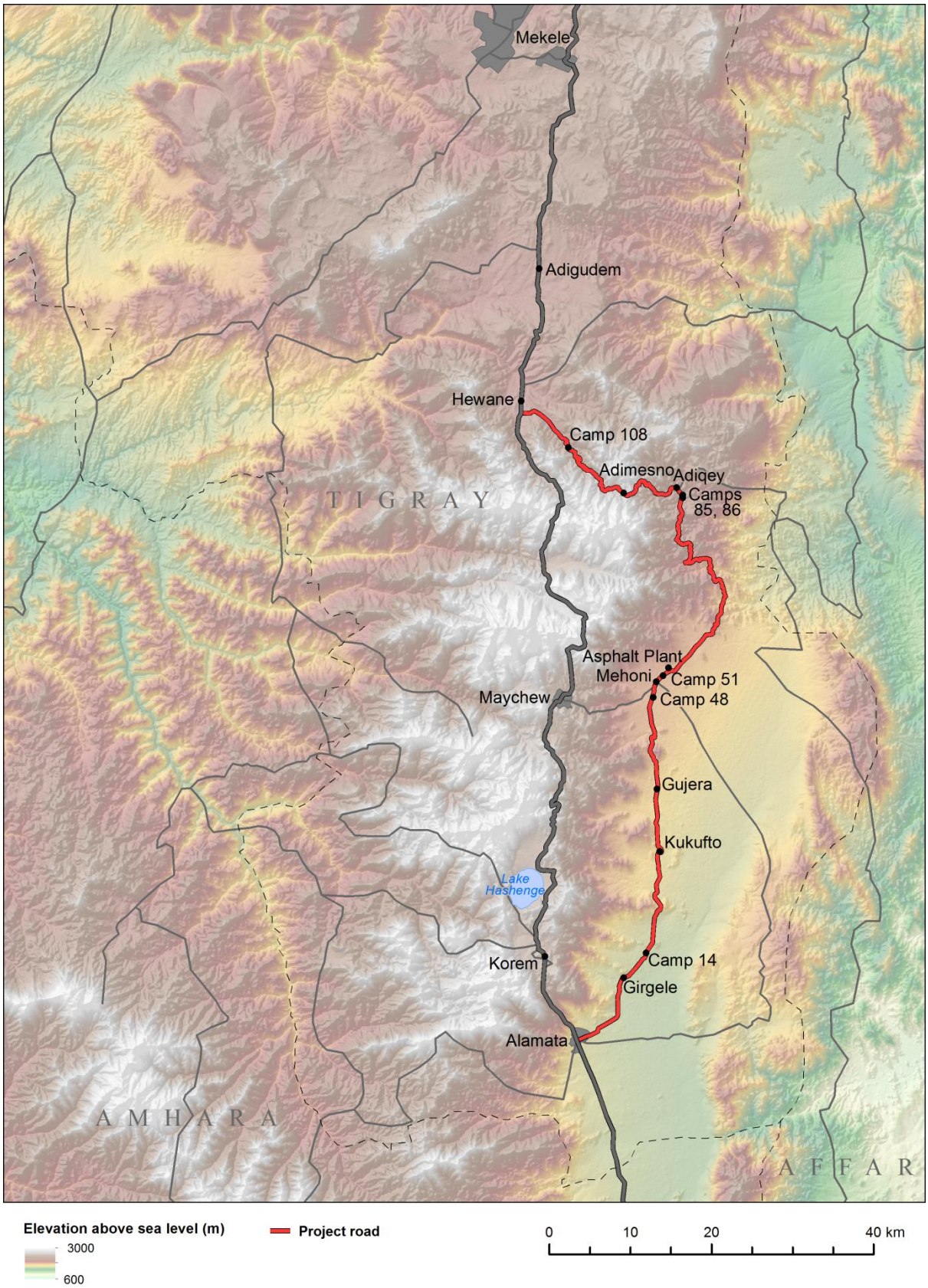
Trinity Term 2014

Contents

Maps

MAP 1. Addis Ababa – Axum – Asmara road, Ethiopia.

MAP 2. The project road, south-eastern Tigray.



List of Acronyms

AADT	Annual Average Daily Traffic
ADT	Average Daily Traffic
ARE	Assistant Resident Engineer
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CNY	Chinese Yuan
DS	Design Standard
ERA	Ethiopian Roads Authority
ETB	Ethiopian Birr
FD	Federal Roads
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FDRE	Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
MNC	Multi-National Corporation
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PRC	People's Republic of China
RE	Resident Engineer
RR	Rural Road
SAR	Special Administrative Region
SEZ	Special Economic Zone
SOE	State-owned Enterprise
TPLF	Tigray People's Liberation Front
TVE	Town and Village Enterprise
USD	United States Dollar
WRRO	*Woreda* Rural Roads Office

Abstract

Over the past decade, road construction has come to represent Chinese engagement with Ethiopia. This study considers the lives of Chinese workers at the lower end of one such project in Tigray, northern Ethiopia. By examining the ways in which Chinese road workers tried to make sense of daily life on the construction site, I reveal the inherent contradictions of a state rhetoric that promoted 'win-win cooperation' ('*huying huli hezuo*') and 'friendly collaboration' ('*youhao hezuo*') between China and Africa, and demonstrate the local manifestations of the much-debated 'China Model'. Initial expectations coloured by state narratives, as well as the migrants' own experiences with domestic development, stood in sharp contrast to realities on the ground. Convinced of the goodwill nature of their activities, Chinese workers were puzzled by and resentful of the apparent ingratitude of local Ethiopians, their lack of cooperation, and, worse, repeated attempts to sabotage the construction work.

Chinese workers' struggles with development in Africa, I argue, should be understood in relation to their background as upwardly mobile rural migrants at the bottom of the corporate hierarchy, successors of engineers dispatched under Mao Zedong who had enjoyed a respectable reputation at home – a reputation current workers felt they were about to lose – and as citizens aware of their country's status in the world as superior to Africa and inferior to the West. The workers sought to live up to Chinese ideals of development by demonstrating and promoting the virtues of self-development, simultaneous development, and entrepreneurialism. Ethiopians, however, did not concede to these ideas, and their lack of cooperation stirred resentment and expressions of self-pity on the part of the Chinese, who blamed the Ethiopian labourers, their *suzhi* (human quality), and *wenhua* (culture) for the limited success of the projects. What Chinese workers failed to realise was that the attitude of Ethiopians was in fact a response to asymmetrical and contested power relations that did not allow for win-win cooperation and friendly collaboration.

1. Introduction

FIGURE 1. Ethiopian surveyor instructs Chinese surveyor, Ethiopia, 5 December 2011. (photo by the author)

In light of the current discourse on China's influence in Africa, the above photograph might appear odd. Should it not be the Chinese surveyor who is carrying the designs and wagging his finger at the Ethiopian, rather than the other way around? By exploring the lives of Chinese workers at the lower end of a multi-million dollar road project in Ethiopia, this study casts a different light on China in Africa to reveal the discrepancy between dominant narratives on Chinese engagement with Africa as circulated in media, foreign policy, and public discourse and engagement as experienced on the ground. My field research with Chinese road-building companies in Tigray, northern Ethiopia, in 2011-12, led me to conclude that Chinese workers' initial expectations, which had been embedded in experiences with development at home, and were coloured by narratives that promoted principles of 'co-development' ('*gongtong fazhan*'), 'win-win cooperation' ('*huying huli hezuo*'), and

'friendly collaboration' ('*youhao hezuo*') between China and Africa, stood in sharp relief to the far less rosy realities of life on the construction site. Convinced of the goodwill nature of their activities, Chinese workers imagined the host society to be keenly awaiting Chinese development assistance. They also believed they had the expertise gained from rapid economic growth at home to teach others about development. The Ethiopian worker, they anticipated, would be eager, motivated, collaborative, subordinate, and humble.

In fact, the attitudes of members of the host society had little in common with what Chinese workers envisaged. From the Chinese vantage point, the Ethiopian worker proved apathetic, half-hearted, and indolent. Furthermore, in the eyes of Chinese managers, civic and legal authorities appeared stubborn, uncooperative, and indifferent. Rather than protecting corporate interests, authorities seemed to support the case of Ethiopian workers. Chinese workers were puzzled by, and resentful of, the apparent ingratitude of local Ethiopians, their lack of cooperation, and, worse, their repeated attempts to sabotage the construction work. This unexpected turn of events led to disappointment and expressions of self-pity on the part of the Chinese – frustrations, I argue, that not only originated from communication and cultural barriers in daily interactions with Ethiopians but also from the migrants' experiences with domestic development. By drawing a link between development in Africa and development in China, I investigate the local manifestations of what scholars have coined the 'China Model' (see among others Teets 2014; Chen and Goodman 2012; Fukuyama and Zhang 2011; Zhao 2010) or the 'Beijing Consensus' (Halper 2012; Ramo 2004) in Ethiopia. Instead of approaching these models as (rather abstract) political doctrines or economic strategies, I investigate them as a set of ideas enacted and (re)shaped by actors on the ground. I ask the question: How did Chinese migrants translate their native perspectives on development in daily actions and interactions with Ethiopians?

The Chinese workers[1] who arrived in Ethiopia during the past decade did not represent China, as had the engineers who had been dispatched to Africa under Mao Zedong; neither did the migrants I studied seek to promote their country's policies overseas. Chinese workers constituted a specific social stratum – poor yet upwardly mobile – that was drawn into a fierce status competition based on wealth at home. Their choice to move to Africa with domestic companies was pragmatic rather than idealistic. Chinese workers admitted frankly that a better salary was their main, if not sole, motivation in going to Ethiopia. A migrant salary helped ease the social pressures at home, which included buying a house, finding a marriage partner, and covering education fees for the next generation. As staff members of Chinese state-owned enterprises (below abbreviated with SOEs), workers earned between USD 1,500 and 1,900 (commonly receiving up to 70 per cent in USD and the remainder in CNY).[2] When employed by a Chinese subcontractor, mostly a private company, they earned less, between CNY 5,000 and 8,000 (completely in CNY), but still significantly more than they would have earned in similar positions in China.

A migrant's salary was typically spent on the down-payment for a new flat in China or the repayment of a mortgage loan. Respondents sarcastically referred to themselves as *fangnu*, mortgage slaves. The purchase of a house (or a second house in the city) was an important part of the migration enterprise and a step to what was valued as a better life upon returning home. A higher income was also seen as justifying spending several years abroad in a country that was deemed poor (*pinqiong*), chaotic (*luan*), and backward (*luohou*) and in the absence of kin and friends. Rather than an escape to the developed world, migration to Africa was an investment in time for the sake of accumulating wealth or start-up capital that would

[1] What I refer to as Chinese workers or Chinese managers (I use the terms interchangeably) included draftsmen, contract managers (often with a civil engineering background), civil engineers, surveyors, site managers, foremen, accountants, cooks, and so forth. Chinese companies in Ethiopia commonly worked with an all-Chinese management. Almost all Chinese workers were in a managing position of some sort. The bulk of the physical labour was carried out by Ethiopian workers.

[2] As of January 2012, mid-way through my field research, CNY 1 was worth circa USD 0.15.

enable migrants to join rapid development in China (Xiang 2014). Migrants – commonly males between the ages of 25 and 40 with a rural background – migrated 'down' to climb the social ladder back in China.

Chinese workers in the construction sector in Africa have received little attention from both the media, which tends to focus on foreign policy, intercontinental trade, and political events and to treat the Chinese as a single actor, and from ethnographic studies, which mostly focus on independent migrants who are involved in retailing (Dobler 2009, 2008; Laribee 2008; Haugen and Carling 2005), manufacturing (Gebre-Egziabher 2007; Brautigam 2003; 2006), medical practices (Hsu 2007), or farming and livestock holding (Brautigam and Tang 2009; Yan and Sautman 2010).[3] These ethnographic studies offer valuable insights into the diverse motivations surrounding migration and the different ways in which migrants cope with challenges posed by the host society. That said, the migratory experiences of independent migrants differ from employees of state-owned and private multinational corporations (MNCs) involved in infrastructure construction in Ethiopia and other African countries; such migrants depend on their employers to be sole care-takers and providers of housing, transport, food, health care, and entertainment. As such, employers command almost complete authority over mobility, security, and lifestyle. MNCs nonetheless play a key role in China's engagement with Africa and so stand to receive the most attention from the international community.

Mundane actions of Chinese migrants and their interactions with Ethiopian workers on and off the construction site reveal the complex, diverse, and contradictory nature of the whole encounter, and yet an exploration into the lives of Chinese employees of MNCs shows that media accounts of Chinese involvement in Africa are misleading. In the West we have depicted Chinese engagement with Africa much as we used to describe European colonialism

[3] Notable exceptions are Lee (2009) and Nielsen (2012), who conducted studies on the lives of employees of larger Chinese enterprises in Zambia and Tanzania (Lee), and Mozambique (Nielsen). Whereas Lee looks at both Chinese and African staff, Nielsen focuses on African workers.

– as an abstract force, 'a *structure* imposed on local *practice*' (Stoler 1989: 135, italics in original) – or we have accorded abstract concepts (e.g. 'China') human qualities. A glance at headlines illustrates the point: 'When China Met Africa' (Francis 7 October 2011), 'China's Material Needs: The Hungry Dragon' (*The Economist* 19 February 2004), 'Resource-Hungry China Invests in Africa' (*Reuters* 29 September 2009), 'China's Oil Fears over South Sudan Fighting' (*BBC News* 8 January 2014), 'China: Africa's Plunderer or Growth Partner?' (*BBC News* 21 May 2012). China is described as a human being (or a dragon) with appetites and needs; so is Africa. The politically charged concepts and sensationalist tone of the debate have cast a shadow over the people who actually *live* the China-in-Africa experience. In her study of British media representation of China in Africa, Mawdsley (2008) demonstrates that Africans are often portrayed as dupes and Chinese as one homogenous group. This study will show the exact opposite of these media tropes: African workers vis-à-vis their employers in a position of power, and the heterogeneity of the Chinese community.

1.1 Paying the African bill

The Chinese workers who migrated to Ethiopia after the mid-2000s went with companies that had been pushed abroad by a slowdown in the construction sector at home. The Chinese road network, workers contended, was by and large saturated. Recent activities amounted to maintenance and the upgrading of existing roads. A few Chinese enterprises operating in Ethiopia had moved out of the domestic market altogether. Other companies saw the number of their projects in China shrink. 'They'd better go to Africa than Tiananmen', engineer Fang Lei[4] remarked, referring to a growing number of unemployed engineers and construction workers in China and the state's concern with creating employment in order to retain social and political stability. Fang himself had resigned from his job in China to move to Ethiopia

[4] I have used pseudonyms for all respondents.

for a lighter work load and a better salary. On his last project in China he held three posts simultaneously, not due to lack of personnel – on the contrary, he reckoned that 30 to 40 per cent of the employees of his company, a regional branch of a major state-owned enterprise, were redundant – but because there were so few new contracts and dwindling revenues as a result.

While a slowdown in the domestic construction sector has pushed Chinese companies and workers abroad, a construction boom, especially in road infrastructure development, has drawn them to Ethiopia. With an average growth of 10.6 per cent real economic growth (GDP) since 2004, Ethiopia (as of 2012) was one of the fastest growing economies in Africa (the average growth in Sub-Saharan Africa over this period has been 5.2 per cent) (World Bank 2012: 1). The extension of the road network is a government priority, as road development is believed to trigger other forms of development. Consequently, since the mid-1990s substantial government funds have flowed into the sector. At the same time, the central government has tried to attract foreign investment and keep 'two trains running' (Abbink 2009: 19): continued development assistance from the West and material aid and investment from China.

As in other African countries, Chinese involvement in Ethiopia in the past decade has centred on infrastructure development, which fills the void left by traditional donors, who have shifted away from infrastructure construction to humanitarian aid (Brautigam 2010). Ethiopia has been one of the countries with the lowest density of roads. With a limited budget at its disposal, the Ethiopian government has sought to attract contractors that have the capacity in manpower and machinery, yet are relatively cheap. The government aimed to extend the existing 49,000-kilometre road network of 2010 to 136,000 kilometres by 2014/15, to reduce the average time on all-weather roads[5] (in hours walking) from 3.7 to a projected

[5] An all-weather road is an unpaved road (e.g. gravel road) that does not get muddy during rainfall.

1.7, and to increase the road density from 44.5 to 123.7 kilometres per square kilometre. In addition to road transport, the government also aims to build up a railway network (Ministry of Finance and Economic Development (MoFED) Ethiopia 2010).

Chinese road-building enterprises have made a major contribution to the government target of extending the road network. Beginning in 1997, Chinese contractors in Ethiopia have constructed USD 6.5 billion worth of roads, totalling 2843 kilometres.[6] Most of these projects were paid for by the Ethiopian government and the International Development Association, and their construction was supervised by Ethiopian or international (e.g. Indian, Swiss, British) consultant companies. Chinese involvement in the African road-building sector is striking for two reasons: the sheer number of projects taken up by Chinese contractors and the sudden arrival of a large number of Chinese nationals. As of 2010, fully 75 per cent of the on-going road projects in Ethiopia were carried out by Chinese companies, according to the Chinese embassy in Addis Ababa. Chinese dominate road building in Ethiopia in another respect: individual projects commonly include over a hundred Chinese expatriate citizens, in contrast to other foreign construction companies operating in the country (e.g. Italian, Turkish, Japanese, and Korean enterprises) that work with an expatriate staff of, at most, ten engineers. In sum, road building has come to represent Chinese engagement with Ethiopia.

Chinese presence, however, is not only visible in urban areas. Encounters between Chinese workers and Ethiopians have taken place in remote rural regions, as road projects have brought migrants to the farthest corners of the country, including Somali region, Affar, and the areas bordering Kenya and Sudan. Built on, and defined almost exclusively by, the construction of an artefact and the application of an inorganic, sticky substance – asphalt – on local earth, encounters between Chinese workers and local communities were short-lived, and

[6] My calculation of data in Alemayehu and Atenafu (2010: 20-21).

not intended to lead to settlement or lasting socio-cultural interaction. Chinese construction companies signed their contracts with the Ethiopian government; revenues did not directly depend on the physical and social environment in which the project was situated. As I will show, however, the self-containment of Chinese compounds and the lack of social bonds with members of the local community made the situation and the position of Chinese workers highly precarious.

Set in rural Tigray,[7] northern Ethiopia, this study follows a major road under construction by a Chinese contractor from mid-2008 to early 2013. The contractor, a national-level SOE, had subcontracted a large part of the works to six Chinese companies: five private enterprises from the Chinese provinces Fujian (two), Hebei, Shandong, and Liaoning and one provincial level state-owned company from Heilongjiang, as well as a number of smaller Ethiopian companies from Addis Ababa and Mekele. The road works were supervised by two Ethiopian consultant firms in joint-venture and funded by the Ethiopian Government and the European Union.[8] All management, down to the on-site foremen, was Chinese, with approximately 120 men and 5 women in total (as of March 2012). The vast share of physical labour was carried out by Ethiopians, varying from workers with little or no skill or experience, to skilled workers such as machine operators, masons, and carpenters. Unskilled labourers were mainly drawn from towns and villages along the project road, whereas skilled workers occasionally came from places farther away in Tigray or Amhara regional states. In total, about 700 to 800 local labourers worked on the road at the peak of the building works. The majority of road

[7] I use the transliterated version of what is also spelled as 'Tigre', the northern-most regional state of Ethiopia.
[8] Road projects typically involve three parties: the client (in the field often referred to as 'the employer'), who commissions the contractor to carry out the construction work and who employs the consultant (the client's representative on-site) to supervise the works with respect to quality, time, costs, and general building practices. On this particular project, both the contractor and the consultant staff resided on-site. Power structures, in particular between contractor and consultant, commonly vary from project to project and from country to country. In this case, the combination of a Chinese contractor and an Ethiopian consultant was an added complication, as the two parties had divergent building practices and codes of conducts.

builders were, in other words, local. The fact that labourers worked in the area they had grown up in, and were familiar with, was a boon to their confidence. Social cohesion was strong, especially vis-à-vis Chinese employers.

'The Italians are back, but now with slit-eyes'. An army veteran's remark to an Ethiopian friend evokes memories of Ethiopia's history of dependence on foreign investment and aid to expand its network of roads throughout the country. The foundation of Ethiopia's present road network was laid during the Italian interregnum (1936-1941). During this period, Italy spent about USD 120 million on the construction of nearly 2,500 kilometres of roads, all of which were treated with macadam to accommodate heavy military transport. This network was extended with funds from the International Development Association (IDA) of about USD 113 million[9] in the 1950s and 1960s. The motorway programs set up and sponsored by the international community (see International Bank for Reconstruction and Development 1972; 1967; 1957; 1954) under the aegis of the International Development Bank in Washington (later the World Bank) seemed to be developed to facilitate the transport of a single export product: coffee beans. Whereas road construction during the period of Italian occupation served chiefly military purposes, American involvement in road development from 1950 onwards implied a shift to agricultural development and commercialisation. The World Bank continued to fund road building in the 1980s and 1990s, when the Road Sector Development Project was launched with the establishment of the present Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. That infrastructure construction is particular to Chinese aid in Africa, as some scholars have argued (e.g. Brautigam 2010), is thus, historically speaking, not true.

The first Chinese contract for road building in Ethiopia was for the almost 300-kilometre road from Weldiya to Wereta in Amhara regional state, a stretch that the UN

[9] My calculation of data in Masresha (1970: 8).

general road survey of 1969 had deemed of low priority (United Nations Development Programme 1969: 7). China committed to the construction of the road in an aid agreement signed by Emperor Haile Selassie and Premier Zhou Enlai in 1971, yet the work would only start in 1975, after the Ethiopian Revolution. The road was finished in 1983. (The first and last sections of the road have been upgraded recently by Chinese companies.) The few Chinese who knew about the project described it as a genuine 'aid' ('*yuanjian*') project, in contrast to the projects carried out more recently.

The first Chinese company entered the Ethiopian construction market as a competitive contractor in 1997 and embarked on the construction of the Addis Ababa Ring Road. Since that time, ten Chinese state-owned enterprises have been active as contractors in Ethiopia's road-building sector. The Ethiopian Roads Authority (ERA) announced at the end of 2010 that Chinese companies had carried out 41 of the 53 of the road construction projects assumed by foreign contractors in the decade since 2000. In contrast to the Ethiopian manufacturing industry, where most Chinese enterprises are private, only SOEs have participated in Ethiopian road project tenders hitherto. This reflects a general trend of Chinese infrastructure construction in Africa. SOEs have a special status – mainly based on capacity, according to informants – assigned by the Chinese government, which allows them to bid for major international contracts.

Of all the Chinese companies active in Ethiopia, only 13 per cent were state-owned, yet these companies were the largest and employed the largest number of both Chinese and Ethiopians (World Bank 2012: 11). In the face of growing internationalisation, Chinese SOEs have come to compete against each other (Gonzalez-Vicente 2011: 406), and this was also the case in the Ethiopian construction sector. Whereas connections (*guanxi*) played an important role in the allocation of projects in the domestic market, in Ethiopia, generally the lowest bidder won the project. As the number of projects has increased, SOEs have

subcontracted both small (provincial or city level) state-owned companies and private enterprises, as was also the case on the road project I studied. The cooperation between large SOEs and private companies was an established practice in Ethiopia.

Chinese companies out-competed Korean, Middle Eastern, European, and even local companies because they were willing to carry out projects for such a low price. 'If this camp would be an American or European camp, it would be big and beautiful. The Chinese keep it simple. They can sleep on the asphalt, if they have to', a local work inspector uttered while we drove past a Chinese compound. Savings on wages, equipment, housing, and construction materials has allowed Chinese companies to keep costs low. 'They even bring spare parts with them in their suitcases when they return to Ethiopia after the holidays', noticed an Ethiopian purchase manager of a Chinese company. Containers from China addressed to construction companies did indeed contain a large variety of Chinese products: from shampoo, washing powder, and toilet roles to bunk beds, mosquito nets, and prefabricated housing – all products that were much cheaper in China. Even with transport costs factored in, these products were more cost-effective for the Chinese than purchasing such goods in Ethiopia.

More importantly, Chinese SOEs were backed by company savings and state bank loans (Morck et al. 2008). 'Chinese tax payers are paying the African bill', one Chinese respondent remarked. (By contrast, Ethiopian companies short on budget would have to abort the building works.) With access to seemingly unrestricted capital, Chinese SOEs had sufficient capacity in both manpower and machinery to continue works even if they incurred a loss. In fact, a large share of the government-funded projects was loss-making. Xie Yang, manager of a project in southern Ethiopia that was, like the Addis Ababa Ring Road Project, losing up to 40 per cent on the contract price, saw road building in Ethiopia as a learning process for which the Chinese, he remarked, had to 'pay tuition fees' ('*jiaona xuefei*').

Chinese contractors in Ethiopia stumbled upon many obstacles, such as limited budgets, shortages of building materials and recourses, in Xie's words 'unreasonable design specifications', and difficulties with intercultural communication. And yet, despite significant losses, the contractors continued, in order to uphold 'the reputation of the company and the dignity of the Chinese (*zhongguoren de zunyan*)'. Perhaps more to the point, once on board, it was difficult to abandon ship. Companies had made considerable initial investments in equipment, transportation, and mobilisation. Gaining back these investments required them to stay and try their luck on the next project, and the next, and so on.

Chinese workers in this context also represented the ordinary tax payer who was paying the African bill at home, only the workers were also paying in Africa. Frontline workers had to deal with the mundane and often nasty consequences of contract prices that had been set extremely low by higher-level managers in Addis Ababa and Beijing, in order to retain a competitive edge in tenders. On-site workers had to cope with shortages of building materials and inaccurate design specifications as well as communication and cultural barriers on a daily basis. In some cases they even had to pay part of what Xie referred to as 'tuition fees'. Two Chinese companies on the Ring Road Project failed to pay their expatriate employees so much as regular salaries. One was on the brink of bankruptcy; the other had a chief executive officer whom some Chinese referred to as a 'capitalist of the first hour'. But again, once on board, it was difficult simply to pack up and leave. The mobility of Chinese employees was severely restricted not only by their employer but also by a seven-day work week. Employers granted their expatriate staff one month off each year or, in some cases, every two years. If employees resigned, they mostly did so during their holidays in China.

Divided between self-interests, such as salary and individual well-being, and the communal benefits of companionship and solidarity, Chinese workers tried to make sense of their work and life overseas. They also attempted to explain and justify the limited success of

the road projects they were involved in. Migrants' ideas, expectations, and hopes had been coloured by optimistic and, at times, opportunistic state rhetoric about the mutual benefits of friendly collaboration between China and Africa, in which China was presented as the model of economic growth and development. Chinese workers sought to live up to this model. However, they soon found themselves struggling with alternative, much less positive, outcomes. Mutual benefit and win-win cooperation proved inherently contradictory ideas – difficult to achieve in a context in which power relations were asymmetrical and contested.

1.2 China as model

Development, Smith (2008: 4) argues, is 'a relational concept that entails comparing one's condition to an ideal representation of other places and times to explain and measure circumstances and actions'. Chinese approaches to development were based on past experiences with foreign development initiatives during China's 'opening up' period (Brautigam 2010), as well as more recent programmes of Chinese state-initiated development in western China (Yeh 2013). Which ideas about development, though, were transported to Ethiopia? And how were they enacted by Chinese workers on the ground? What exactly were the local manifestations of the 'China Model' or the 'Beijing Consensus' in Ethiopia? In my observations, three ideas in particular stood out and seemed to preoccupy Chinese migrants, as managers of Ethiopian workers: the notion of self-development (*ziwo fazhan*), the idea of simultaneous development, and the concept of what I will refer to as 'contained entrepreneurialism'.

What Ethiopians lacked, in Chinese workers' eyes, was an urge to develop the self – a virtue fostered by most migrants and members of their generation at home. The notion of self-development was entrenched in Deng Xiaoping's reformist ideas of the end 1970s and

1980s and more than three decades of rapid economic growth.[10] Ramo (2004) has mentioned the commitment to self-determination as one of the three characteristics of the Beijing Consensus, in addition to the search for innovation in reforms and an emphasis on equality as a measure of progress. Self-determination – the process in which individuals control their own lives – was closely related to the idea of self-development – the process in which individuals improve themselves (as human beings) as well as their lives (in socio-economic terms). Migrants considered self-development as a responsibility, indeed, almost a duty, of the individual. This idea reflects Chinese state campaigns of the 1980s and 1990s aimed at raising the *suzhi* (human quality) of Chinese citizens (Murphy 2004). Explaining the level of development and social distinction (Anagnost 2004) and inequality (Kipnis 2006), *suzhi* was linked to subjugating oneself to (national) development and to neo-liberal principles of the market economy (H. Yan 2003). Along with an optimistic and positivistic understanding of development both of society and the individual, Chinese migrants seemed to have taken these ideas with them to Ethiopia (cf. Nyíri 2006); consequently, migrants pitied the underdevelopment of Africa, blaming both the state, as the teacher of social mores, and the *suzhi* of the people.

In an effort to increase what was referred to as the 'efficiency' ('*xiaolü*') of Ethiopian labourers, Chinese lower- and middle-level managers tried to teach good manners, namely discipline and attentiveness. Aiming to raise the *suzhi* of the local work force, the Chinese tried to refashion young Ethiopian men (who were seen as rustic, lazy, and loud) into compliant and diligent worker subjects. The model for this make-over was the first-generation migrant worker in China who had left the countryside to find employment in the newly established private and foreign-invested industries in the cities in the 1980s and 1990s: a submissive, diligent, dexterous worker body, eager to improve his or her life. Much like

[10] Self-determination in the post-industrial western world is often associated with the individualization of society (Giddens 1991, Bauman 2001). In industrial China, the notion is commonly linked to ideas about productivity and self-realization through labour.

Western developers before them, the Chinese managers tended to universalise human motivation. From the managers' vantage point, the ideal worker subject was expected to make rational decisions based on economic deliberations of, for instance, profit maximisation and considerations of costs and benefits: ideas that reflected a discourse of neo-classical economics (Crewe and Harrison 1998: 36). Instead, the project of reforming Ethiopian workers, turning them into diligent worker subjects, enjoyed limited success. For one thing, Ethiopian labourers turned out to be more articulate than first-generation migrants from rural China. Class differences in China were ingrained in a long history of inequality between city and countryside. Ethiopian society, on the other hand, while also characterised by a rural-urban chasm, did not include outsiders and newcomers in its hierarchy. Chinese workers' response to this cultural divide was to blame it on the supposed irrationality and indolence of Ethiopian labourers.

In Western colonial and development narratives, it was common to perceive culture or 'the customs of the natives' as preventing people from embracing modernity, and, for that matter, development aid (ibid.: 15). The Chinese, too, lay the blame for the limited success of their development assistance initiatives on the supposed natural disposition of Africans. The Chinese, however, employed a different conceptual frame centred on the notion of *suzhi* and the concept of *wenhua* (culture). *Wenhua* in Mandarin is more akin to the notion of civilisation – as the 'progressive, cumulative, distinctively human achievement' (Kuper 2000: 5), which communities or social groups have gained to different degrees – than to the relativist understanding of culture as possessed by, or ingrained in, every society. The Chinese I studied perceived culture as knowledge or etiquette that one could acquire through the educational system and the right, preferably urban, upbringing. Culture was something one could possess, obtain, and accumulate. Where Western development narratives have focused on structure, Chinese narratives centred on agency. The natural disposition of the

native in Western narratives was commonly approached as a structural deficiency: a problem in a group or society of individuals, embedded in a specific natural habitat. By contrast, what the Chinese saw as indolence was attributed to the agent; in other words, indolence was seen as the fault of the individual. The concepts of *suzhi* and *wenhua* were thus used to compare individuals, including people in one's own society. As such, the notions constituted a link between Chinese development initiatives overseas and domestic development.

The idea of simultaneous development was the second distinctive characteristic of Chinese workers' approaches to development, in Africa and in China. Chinese migrants justified their activities in Africa by example. As a result, the project of shaping African labourers into worker subjects was deeply connected to the project of advancing the self and one's compatriots. In Ethiopia the notions of *suzhi* and *wenhua* were also used to compare Chinese colleagues, who would typically comment, or correct each other, on their *suzhi* and *wenhua*. Apart from marking differences between us and them, these key concepts played a major role in identifying Chinese or Chineseness in a context in which competing interests and class difference threatened to weaken (ethnic) consensus (cf. Stoler 2009; 1989). 'Unfit' members of the migrant community, often foremen of a lower class employed by private subcontractors, threatened to spoil the image (*xingxiang*) of the disciplined, knowledgeable, hard-working Chinese who had a higher level of *suzhi* and who possessed 'more' *wenhua*. The preoccupation of higher-level management with image derived from the fear that Chinese authority and integrity were being contaminated by lower segments of the community. Higher-level managers, in particular certified engineers working for state-owned contractors, were engaged in a constant effort to educate those with a lower *suzhi* and thereby sanitize the reputation of the Chinese as a whole.

Simultaneous development was also expected to take place on a whole other level, that is, between the state and the self. National or societal development was seen as the

outcome of a collaborative effort of a strong pro-development state – a state that encouraged economic growth and stimulated development – and its citizens. Fukuyama describes the relation between the Chinese state and Chinese society as based on purely moral accountability, meaning that the state is morally accountable to the people (Fukuyama and Zhang 2011: 43). This relationship, according to Fukuyama, is one of the main elements of the China Model.[11] For the Chinese government, securing economic growth and development has been essential to winning the trust and support of the people. However, moral accountability also had to be reciprocated. Development, in other words, was seen as a mutual effort on the part of the state and the individual, in which both were expected to make sacrifices for a higher cause.

According to Zhao (2010), the two main components of the China Model are a liberal economy that is open to foreign and domestic investment, and a ruling party that retains control over the government, the courts, and the army, as well as areas of soft power (e.g. information and media). The co-existence of a liberal economy and a strong party-state has led to what Ong and Li (2008) describe as a tense articulation between neo-liberal thought and socialist state sovereignty. Since the economic reforms, a neo-liberal logic associated with entrepreneurialism, the process by which citizens are set free to fully develop the self, has filtered into an economy that is still largely controlled by the state (ibid.: 2). Entrepreneurialism in China is embedded in hierarchical structures, while self-expression, as it were, is authorised from above. Much like self-development, entrepreneurialism was largely perceived in moral terms, as the responsibility of individuals vis-à-vis themselves and society writ large.

Chinese workers in Ethiopia credited the present state of their country to the blood, toil, tears, and sweat of individuals motivated to improve their lives and society as a whole,

[11] The other elements of the China Model mentioned by Fukuyama (and Zhang 2011) are: an emphasis on export and industrialisation, a focus on infrastructure facilities and financing, and a modest social safety net.

and to individuals who dared to take financial and social risks in order to gain profits. A certain degree of risk was seen as essential to economic growth and development; even so, entrepreneurialism was to be harnessed by the self and regimented by the state, in other words, to be 'contained'. In the eyes of Chinese managers, Ethiopians, or Africans in general, lacked this entrepreneurial ethos, or what Xie Yang referred to as a 'pro-active and upward thinking attitude' ('*jiji xiangshang de xintai*'). The ostensible absence of this ethos was then used to explain the country's poverty and underdevelopment. As far as the Chinese were concerned, only if and when Ethiopians and the Ethiopian state acknowledged the luminous ideas of self-development, simultaneous development, and contained entrepreneurialism, would the country and its inhabitants be able to free themselves from underdevelopment.

1.3 The project, the road, and the region

Geteye Lema frowned when I asked his permission to conduct research on the Alamata-Mehoni-Hewane road upgrading project (referred to as 'AH-project' or 'AH *xiangmu*' in Chinese). 'Have you not heard of the new expressway from Addis Ababa to Adama? That road is also under construction by the Chinese. Perhaps you should have a look at that project', he said. A large overview design of the Addis Ababa-Adama motorway graced the wall of the general office of the Design and Build Department of the ERA. This motorway was a success story: funded by the China Africa Development Bank, the budget was high, as were the stakes, and the media were on top of the project, which gave the Chinese contractor an extra push to finish the works before the end date stipulated in the contract. The project I wanted to research was loss-making, and coined a 'dormant project' due to its delay. 'But of course', Lema relented, 'if you insist, you can go ahead'.

'ERA is nervous, but we are even more nervous', uttered a staff member of the Chinese contractor. The delay of the AH-project was caused by the design or, more

specifically, the design specifications, which fit neither the geographical terrain nor the estimated contract costs of ETB 645,000,000.36 (including VAT).[12] The slope gradients and curve radii of the existing gravel road were too high and too long, respectively, and needed adjustments, but complying with ERA's specifications would imply extra work and a drain on the contractors' limited budget. After more than a year both parties gave in to reach a compromise. 'We have learned a lot from Alamata', acknowledged Geteye, assistant director of the ERA's Design and Build Department. The AH-project was the first design-and-build project (DB-project) for the employer as well as for the contractor, which was responsible for both the design and the construction work and for which the contractor had received a lump sum of ETB 5,657,894.74 per kilometre. The project contract was signed on 31 December 2007 and mobilisation started early 2008.[13]

The existing route from Alamata to Hewane had been a gravel road constructed as a detour for the Alamata-Betemara section of the Addis Ababa-Aksum road, the main north-south axis of the country, which was being upgraded at the time. After completion, though, the detour proved more popular than the main asphalt road, in particular for drivers of heavy trucks[14] and trailers, who preferred to circumvent the steep slopes and hairpin curves of Mount Gera Kahsu. For this reason the Ethiopian Roads Authority decided to upgrade the detour to a DS-4 asphalt concrete road with a single asphalt layer (5 centimetres) and two carriage ways (7 metres each).[15] At the end of the project, an extra asphalt layer was added to ten kilometres of the mountain section, because the annual average daily traffic had increased

[12] As of January 2012, ETB 1 equalled USD 0.05 (or USD 1 equalled ETB 17.29). Since the end of my field research, the CNY has appreciated, and the ETB has depreciated, against the USD. Respondents were well aware of exchange rates and the fluctuating value of currencies.
[13] See appendix 1 for the project's invitation to bid, published in *The Ethiopian Herald*, the major English-language newspaper in Ethiopia.
[14] The word 'truck' was used for 'lorry' on the building site.
[15] See appendix 2 for the table of road types and specifications developed and used by the Ethiopian Road Authority.

significantly over the course of the project and no longer corresponded to the original standard.

The geography of the region played a key role in the project's story of near-failure. Traversing the northern part of Raya, a region that covered the very north of Amhara and the very south of Tigray regional state, the project road ran in the direction of Mekele City. From Alamata, the starting point, the road crossed the Raya Plain in a curve around the mountains, followed by a climb into the mountains until the end point just before Hewane. The borders of Raya, I was told, did not correspond with the borders that had been drawn up when the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia was established in 1991, yet the people of Raya shared a common origin, language, and culture. The road ran through three rural *woredas* (administrative districts): Raya Alamata, Raya Azebo, and Hintalo Wajirat, and one urban *woreda*, Alamata Town. Together, these *woredas* had a total population of 463,760 (CSA 2012). The district was predominantly rural. Raya Azebo, for instance, with Mehoni Town as administrative centre, had a population of 150,162, whereas the town itself (*Mehoni ketema*) numbered only 15,224 residents (Raya Azebo *woreda* administration 2012). The towns, then, were dependent on road traffic and the services provided to the surrounding rural areas.

With a population of circa 40,000 (Alamata *woreda* administration 2012), Alamata was the largest town along the project road. Established by the Italians in 1936, Alamata had begun as a road builders' camp of the Italian construction firm Azienda Autonomia Statale della Strada (AASS) and a military establishment (Tsega 2000: 22) situated on a plain south of the foothills of Mount Gera Kahsu. (Different stories account for the name of this infamous mountain: some say it was the name of a wealthy man; others claim it was a curse word shouted by an Italian engineer who absent-mindedly let a concrete pipe roll down the slope.) Alamata became an important stop on 'La Strada della Vittoria' ('The Road of Victory') built by the Italians. In 1938, Alamata counted 1850 inhabitants and was the major

town in the region. Mehoni had at that time a population of 560 (ibid.: 35). After the Italian interregnum, the new administration of Emperor Haile Selassie faced stiff resistance in this south-eastern part of Tigray, and, even now, the attitude of the area's inhabitants towards the central government in Addis Ababa remains ambivalent, despite the fact that the governing party hails from Tigray. In sum, the Chinese had entered a region characterised by historic tensions between local rural communities and the central state in Addis Ababa. Complicating matters was the fact that Chinese relations with Tigrayans cut across existing central-local and, to a lesser degree, urban-rural divisions – a dynamic, I will demonstrate, with major implications.

Political tensions were woven into the fabric of the region as early as 1943, when a coalition of peasants, bandits, and members of the aristocracy who saw their autonomous position under threat by the state (Young 1998: 192) initiated a rebellion known as *woyane* (revolt) (Gebru 1984). The revolt, which was based off the main road (in the region crossed by the project road), was crushed that same year by the central government in cooperation with the British Royal Air Force (Aregawi 2004: 572), resulting in the confiscation of land by the state. In 1953, after a series of disputes between former land owners and purchasers, the government decided to return the lands (Tsega 2000: 44-46). Even so, the central administration remained discredited in the region, not least because the new taxes were much higher than they had been under the Italians (Erlich 1981: 217). Then in the 1980s, Alamata became a stronghold of the Derg, which tried to hold onto the towns along the main road (Hammond 2002: 97). Meanwhile, areas farther off, such as Azebo and Mehoni Town, fell into the hands of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in 1981. The TPLF fought against the Derg regime and Amhara dominance (Aregawi 2004; Donham 2002; Young 1998). Alamata became the scene of an important battle and fell into the hands of the TPLF as late as 1989 (Tsega 2000: 69).

Agricultural history adds another layer to the story. Rayans told me with pride that their region was the most fertile in Tigray, with maize, sugarcane, sorghum, and teff[16] grown as the main crops. Most peasants in the region were small-holders. The national and international markets' reach into the area was limited, in contrast to more fertile regions in Oromia and Gambella in southern Ethiopia. There was one large livestock farm along the project road (with a capital of ETB 25 million) that produced exports for the Middle East. Another large fruit and vegetable farm run by an expatriate British citizen of Indian origin was situated fifteen kilometres off the road. In the past this area had also produced cotton for the Italian-founded cotton ginning factory in Alamata. Rumour had it that the factory had been seized by the central government of Emperor Haile Selassie to retaliate against defiant Tigrayans, and sold to Jimma in the country's south-west (Tsega 2000: 46). The Chinese were by far the largest employer in the region during the period of construction, but locally produced staples were often insufficient to feed the workers and had to be imported, chiefly from the south. There was also a history of major famines in the region, in 1965-66, 1973-74 and 1984-85 (ibid.: 63). The price of teff, the main staple from which Ethiopians make *injera* (large spongy flat bread), had increased to ETB 20 per kilogram in the spring of 2012, in comparison to ETB 14 per kilogram in Addis Ababa. In sum, in a country where most transport is by road, distance matters; in turn, agricultural produce that had to be trucked north from the more fertile south was very expensive.

Cultural identity was complex as well, with people in the region commonly identifying themselves along religious lines. Although Tigray is largely Orthodox Christian – more than 4.1 million of the 4.3 million Tigrayans are Orthodox Christian, according to the 2007 census (CSA 2007) – a large number of the 170,833 Muslims in Tigray (ibid.) lived on the Raya Plain, bordering Affar regional state. The Muslims in the region shared an Oromo

[16] Teff is an African cereal cultivated chiefly in Ethiopia and used to make flour.

origin. Names of villages along the project road such as Ta'a and Kukufto are reminiscent of Oromo pastoralist settlements on the Raya Plain (*Rayyarayuma* in Oromifa) that date to the sixteenth century, when their livelihood was dependent on raising cattle and camels (Gebru 1984: 83). An Ethiopian laboratory technician noted that there were still a number of people in Kukufto who could speak Oromifa.[17] Muslim pastoralists in the heart of this Orthodox-Christian area were often raided and campaigned against by monarchs such as Emperor Yohannes IV (1872-1889) (Tsega 2000: 5-7). To this day, the pastoralists remain unpopular. Town administrators I interviewed, for instance, saw the Muslims in their region as unfaithful. They were 'different' from the peoples of Saudi Arabia who had arrived in the seventh century, I was told by Halefom Nathnael, a former history teacher who was assigned a post in Raya Alamata *woreda* administration.

Most settlements in the mountains, such as Adiqey, the third largest town on the project road, were Orthodox Christian. Adiqey was first connected to the main road twelve years ago. 'The first Muslim, a school teacher, came as the [gravel] road was constructed', recalled Shiferaw Abel, the local policeman. 'He left soon thereafter. The residents were not happy with him at all. You know, the people here are very religious. They visit the church every day'. Although the first Muslim had been unwelcome, generally the road was seen as having brought an end to the xenophobic sentiments of town residents. (During my stay in Adiqey I lived in the room of Ahmed, a Muslim grader operator.)

All inhabitants in the region were commonly thought 'to believe in Jesus' ('*xin yesu*'). That said, religious affiliations were not noted, or were deemed unimportant, by Chinese. The Chinese, instead, drew distinctions between workers' places of origin, a practice common in China. 'Where are you from?' (e.g. '*Mehoni allä*?' or '*Alamata allä*?' in creole) was often the first question asked when a new labourer introduced him- or herself. The Chinese preferred

[17] Oromifa is the language of the Oromo people.

hiring labourers who were, like them, outsiders in the area. Unlike Tigrayans, outsiders (Amharas, for instance) were thought less likely to conspire against the Chinese. As a result, the labour force of the Chinese on the project was a peculiar mix, with a relatively high proportion of Amharas, sometimes brought along from other projects in Affar and Amhara regional states. These Amharas occupied the higher positions of foremen, operators, and drivers. By contrast, unskilled workers were mostly Tigrayans recruited along the construction route. Both Amharic and Tigrigna were spoken among the workers. The language used for communication with the Chinese was a mixture of Amharic, Pidgin English, and Mandarin. Not surprisingly, miscommunication persisted, complicating interactions between expatriate managers and local workers.

The second largest town on the project road (at kilometre 50) was Mehoni, referred to by the Chinese as 'Maoni' or simply as '*zhen*' (small administrative town). The administrative centre of Raya Azebo *woreda*, Mehoni was argued to have taken the place of Korem on the old Italian-built route as an inn for truck drivers on the way to Mekele and further to Aksum. With its strategic placement – a day's ride from Addis Ababa – and with the arrival of asphalt in March 2012, Mehoni grew in the relatively short period of time (ten months) I stayed on the project. Further north, at kilometre 58, the road left the plain and started to climb, passing Adiqey (kilometre 86), and the highest point of the project road at an altitude of 2,636 metres, at the village of Adimesno (kilometre 95). The difference in climate between Adimesno and the lowest point of the road, close to Alamata, with an altitude of 1,446 metres, was palpable.

The project road joined the main (Italian-built) road again after 116 kilometres. At the junction, the end point of the road close to Hewane Town, a board had been posted that advised drivers to use the main road. Few complied, especially drivers of large trucks and trailers for whom the old route was a headache. Minibuses, however, continued to travel the

old route, as more people (and thus more customers) lived along that road. With the permission of the ERA, the Chinese closed the mountain section of the project road early in 2012, opening it again when most asphalt works were finished, three-quarters of a year later.

I arrived at the project in December 2011, when the construction works were running at full pace. Because of the length of the project road and the delayed designs of the mountain section, I was able to follow different parts of the work. So, for instance, while the asphalt was approaching Alamata, the earth works in preparation for the sub-base at the end of the road had only just begun. Upon my departure ten months later, the flat section of the road, covering 58 kilometres, had already been handed over to the ERA.

1.4 Road ethnography

The major part of the data in this study was gathered during a period of ten months of field research in south-eastern Tigray in 2011-12. These data are supplemented with material I collected in the library of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa, interviews I conducted with employees of head offices of Chinese construction companies in the capital city, as well as data gathered on the Addis Ababa Ring Road Project (Phase III), which I followed for over a period of three months.[18] In total I conducted interviews[19] with 81 Chinese involved in road building up and down the corporate hierarchy, including: project managers, engineers of various specialisations, draftsmen, contract managers, surveyors, mechanics, service personnel, and foremen on-site. In addition, I interviewed 16 Ethiopian employees of Chinese construction companies and 27 Ethiopian engineers, mainly employed by the ERA or Ethiopian consultant firms that supervised Chinese contractors. Unfortunately, my command of Amharic and Tigrinya was insufficient to conduct in-depth interviews with Ethiopian workers. Even so, these interviews and informal conversations with workers and

[18] In total I spent thirteen months in Ethiopia, from August 2011 to September 2012.
[19] All interviews were conducted, transcribed and translated by me.

residents (in Amharic) did provide me with substantial information. In addition, Ethiopian consultant engineers spoke English. To protect the identity of respondents, I use pseudonyms for the names of both individuals and companies.[20] Due to the importance of geographic locations in my study, geographical names have been left unchanged. During the time I stayed in south-eastern Tigray, I lived with both Chinese and Ethiopians.[21] Spending almost equal time with Ethiopian engineers offered me valuable insights into Ethiopian perspectives on the Chinese.

Apart from conducting structured and semi-structured interviews, I studied official documents,[22] such as design specifications, monthly progress reports, correspondences between the ERA, and the consultant and contract documents. Access to Chinese respondents, in particular, for interviews proved mainly a concern of a practical nature. Respondents worked seven days a week, from seven in the morning to half past six at night. After a quick dinner in the camp's canteen, they retired to their rooms for a rest or to play video games. Or they disappeared to the table tennis room. As a result, apart from a series of recorded structured interviews I conducted in the late evenings, most of the data I gathered was from informal conversations in cars and on construction sites resounding with the sometimes overwhelming sound of excavators and rollers in the burning sun. 'You get blacker every day', kidded an Ethiopian friend in Addis Ababa, 'you start to look like the Chinese on the construction site'.

The danger of ethno-centrism looms large in a study like this. Although Chinese respondents were located at the bottom end of the corporate hierarchy, they acted in accord with how they perceived themselves – as superior to the Ethiopian workers, a distinction held up by class as well as ethnic boundaries. Anthropologists have long recognised the

[20] Both in China and in Ethiopia surnames appear prior to given names.
[21] I spent 93 days (in nights counted) in Chinese camps, 97 days in the consultant engineer camp, and 44 days in settlements on, or in the vicinity of, the project road.
[22] All the (untranslated) documents that appear in this study have been reproduced exactly as they appear in the original, errors included.

implications of ‘studying up’ (Ortner 2010; Nader 1972), that is, research on political or economic elite in a discipline that traditionally tends to focus on the worker rather than the employer, the ruled rather than the ruler, or the colonised rather than the coloniser. Ethnography often speaks in favour of the subordinate group while deploring the dominant power, regardless of whether this power is structural or exerted by specific individuals. As the ethnographer is mostly forced to choose one’s loyalties, the study of both the dominant and the dominated is a rather tough and troublesome task. I have been constrained in many respects by my focus on Chinese workers, for instance, becoming insensitive to the power of corporate control and the shadows cast by Chinese employers over their Ethiopian workers. How much did corporate power permeate various facets of workers’ lives? Was I romanticising resistance (Abu-Lughod 1990) and downplaying the power of expatriate employers? While workers spoke of exploitation and oppression, management argued otherwise. I have attempted to pay respect to the perspectives of respondents and the concepts they used and I have chosen to avoid sticky concepts, such as ‘exploitation’ or ‘race’.

Another difficulty of a more practical nature I faced in the field was mobility, or rather the lack thereof. With more than 100 kilometres to cover in my field site, mobility became a major concern. I did not have a car, which occasionally turned out to be an unexpected advantage. By hitching rides I gained access to people on the road, people I would otherwise not have met: truck drivers on their way to Addis Ababa or Djibouti; Bajaj drivers like Kiros, who was making good money from his investment in two Indian vehicles since the arrival of asphalt in Mehoni; the Japanese engineer who was installing a water supply system in the region; and the Dutchman who was managing the special transport of more than a hundred wind turbines to Ashagoda over the as-yet-unfinished road. These contingencies helped me to grasp the wider context in which my research was situated. I

talked with drivers and by-riders of Bajajs,[23] pick-ups, land cruisers, Isuzus, dump trucks, trailers, minibuses, and horse carts: all men. (I had only rarely spotted female drivers, in urban Ethiopia.) Hitching rides from the camps to the building sites also enabled me to talk to respondents (my actual research population), who spent their only free hours and relaxing moments on a busy work day, of which they had seven a week, in their cars. A recurring issue, however, was the simultaneity of events, which can also be an issue in geographically smaller field sites. The problem was that, due to my limited mobility, I could not simply switch one event at kilometre 103 for another at kilometre 14. I had to make choices, and usually did so in the mornings so that I could avoid standing on the road without transport back to camp at dusk, usually between six and seven in the evening.

Thanks to my respondents, I learned to think and talk in kilometres. Not only distances but also locations were perceived and expressed in kilometres. The often posed questions 'Where are you?' or 'Where are you going?' had to be answered accordingly, with 'I am at kilometre such-and-such', and so on. On my first day I was informed that the asphalt had reached kilometre 18, the base-course was approaching kilometre 8, and the sub-base had entered Alamata Town at kilometre 1 plus 800 (metres). After becoming familiar with the pace of different construction works – the project's asphalt works, for instance, moved at about the rate of a kilometre a day – I developed a sense of which works were happening where, at which kilometre. After a few months, I also got on reasonably well with the engineer's jargon in Chinese and English. Certainly, reading project documents facilitated this process. I learned that an RE was a Resident Engineer, that PM stood for Project Manager and not Prime Minister, that a turning point (or 'TP', or a time-out gesture with the hands) was a surveying term indicating a point temporarily marked to establish the position of a level instrument at a new position, that RHS stood for 'right-hand side' and 'ROW-

[23] The Bajaj was a three-wheeler imported from India and used for passenger transport. Bajaj refers to the name of the Indian manufacturer.

problem' for a 'right-of-way problem'. I learned the different road base layers and their specifications (thickness or litre per m^2), as well as the important names in the profession. I came to know that BEZA and CORE were consultant firms, and Sunshine a local contractor that paid their machine operators generous salaries. These technicalities and inside knowledge were essential in order to understand communications on-site.

Throughout my field research I tried to remain attentive to the 'interviewer effect' (Brewer 2000: 65) and to think about how respondents would have answered my questions or reacted to my presence were I a Nigerian man or a Chinese woman. To my surprise I was, despite my white skin and blonde hair, seen as Chinese by many Tigrayans. Consequently, I was able to sense how locals responded to a Chinese individual (like me, at least). When I was walking to Hotel Meaza ('pleasant smell') in Alamata on January 20, 2012, a young man shouted angrily at me from the other side of the road: 'Why are you working? You should go to church and pray!' It was Epiphany (Timket), a religious holiday. Nonetheless, the Chinese continued the building works that day, which resulted in strife on and off the construction site. On this occasion I could feel and experience the anger many locals bore against the Chinese.

The fact that I was seen as a Chinese national also poses questions about ethnicity (or race). In colonial history the notion of ethnicity was commonly related to outward appearance (e.g. skin colour, physique), which determined judgements about the overall quality (internal and external) of a person, a social group, or a people. My situation demonstrates that race was in some sense relational and flexible. As for my focus group, the Chinese workers and, to a lesser extent, the Ethiopian engineers of the consultant and the ERA, I was a Westerner of, in a way, neutral ethnicity. Negative impressions the Ethiopian engineers had of their Chinese colleagues, and vice versa, were told to me candidly. I tried to grasp different views of the works and of life on-site, including those of the three parties of the engineering triangle: the employer (ERA) (*yezhu*), the contractor (*chengbaoshang*) (as well as the subcontractors,

fenbaoshang), and the consultant (*jianli*). This proved awkward, as the three parties maintained conflicting interests and held various secrets that I, as a researcher, was prying at (at least potentially), or passing on to other parties. The fact that the project was loss-making and I got to see a lot of 'failures' did not make the situation any easier; being suspected of knowing 'too much' almost culminated in my removal from the project two weeks before my planned departure.

Notably, concerns of both Chinese and Ethiopians that I was perhaps getting to know 'too much' did not reflect views of international politics. At the start of my field research I applied a certain self-censorship. Predominantly negative media coverage in the West of China's role in Africa (Mawdsley 2008) led me to assume that respondents would likely be suspicious of me as a Western researcher. In general, though, they were not. Only once was I reminded of international politics, when Chen Delin, a mechanic and manager of an asphalt crew, asked me out of the blue: 'Do you really think that Hilary Clinton is right in saying that we are colonising Africa?' Chen and I were hiding from the sun in a box culvert; above us was the deafening rumbling of asphalt rollers, next to us were giggling local children following our conversation. 'Surely, the Chinese government has her motives; to gain votes in the United Nations, for instance. People and states are in essence the same. They need friends to win against enemies. But honestly, do you really think we are colonising Africa?' Chen had just explained that his company, a private construction firm based in Shandong province, had lost at least ETB 10 million to theft in Ethiopia, mainly of petrol, tyres, steel, and spare parts. From his perspective it was the Chinese who were being exploited, rather than the other way around.

1.5 Organisation of the thesis

The thesis begins with a discussion of the precarious situation of Chinese migrants in south-eastern Tigray and the internal divisions in the migrant community, then continues with an exploration of encounters between expatriate workers and Ethiopian labourers on the construction site. In the end, the focus will shift again to the Chinese and their perspectives on development. Zooming in on one of the Chinese compounds along the project road, chapter two provides an overview of the physical space as well as the social and emotional circumstances in which Chinese workers lived and which shaped – and was shaped by – their encounter with the local community. I show how relations between Chinese and Ethiopians were mediated through material culture and built form, as well as through emotions such as fear and frustration. Incidents of theft, which had material as well as symbolic dimensions, widened the physical as well as social distance between Chinese and Ethiopians.

Chapter three turns to the implications of this experienced isolation. Inspired by Stoler's work (1989; 2009), I discuss the dialectics of solidarity and distinction that played out within the Chinese community. In order to maintain ethnic boundaries and protect the reputation and respectability of the diligent and knowledgeable Chinese, higher-ranking managers of state-owned enterprises attempted to reprimand and teach lower segments of the Chinese migrant community. I show that internal stratification was based not so much on social distinctions that emerged in Africa as on social and economic divisions transported from China.

In Chapter four I shift my focus to the building site and explore lower- and middle-level managers' attempts to increase productivity and profitability by disciplining Ethiopian workers by modelling them after first-generation migrant workers who had left the land to work in the cities in post-Mao China. In this undertaking, the Chinese stumbled on false expectations. In managements' eyes, the African workers proved recalcitrant and lazy, rather

than keen and submissive. Chinese disciplinary techniques, which were often based on personal whim and had counterproductive effects, I show in chapter five. Ethiopian labourers, in response, defied managerial attempts to enforce a strict time regime, to curtail the freedom and mobility of workers during work time, and to ban chatting, playing, and overall shirking. Opposition against management could be subtle as well as blatant and grotesque. Workers' protests were mounted either by their own efforts, or through mediators, such as *woreda* courts and civic authorities, as I demonstrate in chapter six. Individual and collective acts that were specifically aimed at improving workers' conditions were often mediated by administrative or legal authorities. The support of the local state apparatus caused resentment on the part of the Chinese, who lamented bitterly that they had come to Ethiopia with the best intentions, and were yet thwarted by the state. Resentment in turn led to self-pity expressed in narratives of suffering; I discuss these in the closing chapter.

2. Fort China

Between 10 July and 10 August 2012, the following items went missing from the asphalt plant compound: two main gates (with an interval of 18 days between each theft), one laptop, half a kilo of sugar (more or less), three onions, one accumulator battery, 22 bitumen drums, ten bitumen drum plates, a pair of boots, a cotton bag with work tools, three truck tyres, two dirty overalls, a home-grown melon, and nearly 2,000 litres of water. In this period five thieves were caught and four shots were fired by security personnel – twice at night time, twice in the late afternoon. Only one theft was reported to the police in Mehoni. The two gates were never found, and were replaced by a wooden framework; the guard suspected of the theft was dismissed. The laptop was discovered behind the cupboard in the mechanic's workshop two hours after it disappeared. One of the drivers was accused and fired, as was the

cleaning lady who stole the sugar and onions. The three truck tyres never appeared again; neither did the cotton bag with work tools. Almost all the thieves remained unknown. The new tool bag was stored in a corner of the office. According to a local worker, the boots and dirty overalls were taken by a guard. The watermelon that grew behind the office had gone missing when the accountant left her workplace to assist with discharging petrol. She had kept an eye on the melon the whole morning and upon returning to the office the first thing she did, as always, was look out the window. The melon, now big enough to eat, had, in the short time she was gone, disappeared. The nearly 2,000 litres of water went missing en route between the water pump station and the asphalt plant. The Chinese were not aware of this theft.

In July 2012 I moved back to the asphalt plant, where I had resided in February and March of that year. Theft had been aggravated in the duration. The above details, taken from a logbook I kept during my second stay, offer an overview of the variety of items stolen and the measures taken by the crew of the asphalt plant. When on 26 July the main gate disappeared for a second time, a policeman was asked to guard the residential compound at night, from seven o'clock in the evening to half past six in the morning. Eager to top up his meagre income with ETB 200 a night, Policeman Hagos served the camp loyally. He left only once before the end of his shift, at five o'clock in the morning, when three stolen camels were found in a nearby village. Hagos was asked to bring the camels to the police station in Mehoni, where the owner was asked to collect the animals. With the police on guard at night, theft decreased, but it did not cease.

In this chapter I shed light on the precarious circumstances that shaped the lives of Chinese migrants in south-eastern Tigray and their dealings with the host community. I do so by addressing theft, the most prevalent form of subversion to which all Chinese camps along the project road were subject, to a greater or lesser extent. I illustrate how the appropriation of

what compound residents considered private property affected multiple facets of daily life inside and outside the isolated compounds.

'What one man regards as theft, another may regard as his right', Cooper (1997: 118) reminds us when addressing theft of agricultural produce from colonial clove plantations in Zanzibar. People tend to (re)claim what they see as theirs, or as collective property. At issue in south-eastern Tigray was not only a struggle over the right to ownership. The appropriation of company property or possessions of individual Chinese was also tightly linked to defiance of management and managerial oppression. In order to explore the response of Chinese management, rather than looking at the motives of local thieves, I investigate the emotional and social impact of theft and the ways in which it shaped interaction with the other. Theft provoked, enraged. The Chinese grew disheartened. Over time, fear and frustration came to guide Chinese actions and reactions to certain situations. Residing in the compound myself, I could sense the despair, reinforced by nights of bad sleep. The night I was awakened by a Kalashnikov fired next to my bedroom door, I realised I was a participant as much as an observer. It therefore deserves note that I viewed the events through, or with, the eyes of the victim. The Chinese passed their anger on to me. As for the thieves, if I was not seen as Chinese, I was certainly considered a collaborator. This leaves me to guess about the motives of the thieves, although incidents of theft often spoke for themselves.

Theft typically occurred in the Chinese compounds along the road, and not in the consultant engineers' camp – where the loot could be equally lucrative – nor in the Ethiopian workers' camps. Nonetheless, Chinese compound residents routinely failed to acknowledge that theft was directed against them as managers, and not merely as wealthy individuals. I argue that theft was largely the result of uneasy and precarious management-labour relations. By contrast, Chinese migrants adopted a socio-economic approach to analysing the thefts, which held that stealing was a common characteristic of societies suffering from poverty and

deprivation, and of people who had yet to cast off indolence. Blame was mostly directed at civic authorities, who were seen as responsible for failing to adopt effective measures against theft and to teach citizens about private property, including the fact that the appropriation thereof was a forbidden and illegal activity. The behaviour of civic authorities, on the contrary, was seen as legitimising, even encouraging, theft. Lack of support from the local state apparatus resulted in frustration and self-pity on the part of the Chinese, who were forced to adopt their own preventive measures, such as hiring private guards. Consequently, in response to an increasing number of incidents of theft, Chinese compounds were gradually transformed into little fortresses.

2.1 Isolation and alienation

The location of Chinese camps outside local settlements, project manager Gu Hongyang explained, was a preventive measure against theft. This way thieves had to cover longer distances to hide or carry their loot. But the physical separation from local settlements had another, unintended effect, that of alienation from the Tigrayan community – a situation which arguably exacerbated theft. Lee (2009: 653) has deployed the concept of *feidi* (enclave) to describe residential compounds of Chinese migrants in Africa, identifying *feidi* as distinct territorial units that are segregated from their environment by physical as well as socio-cultural boundaries. Translating as 'flying place', *feidi* are home to people in transit – temporary migrants who intend to return home after a certain period of time. Whereas *feidi* aroused a sense of familiarity and companionship among their residents, they served to reinforce social distance from the people who lived around the expatriate camps.

Operated by a Chinese company that I will call Golden Roads Enterprise, the asphalt plant was located outside Mehoni Town; in engineers' terms, the plant stood at 52+200 310 LHS, meaning 52 kilometres and 200 metres from Alamata Town (the starting point of the

project road), 310 metres off the road on the left-hand side (see figure 2). The junction where a dirt road, which led between cactus plants[24] to the compound, branched off the project road was dubbed 'our door' by the Chinese asphalt plant crew. The request for the plot of land on which the plant was constructed was made by RCE, the contractor and employer of Golden Roads, on 24 January 2010. Official approval from the road authorities followed in March. It would take another year before the asphalt plant commenced production. The plant site, indicated as 'barren land' by the ERA, was not fenced off upon handover to the subcontractor, and the asphalt plant crew soon discovered that 'their' terrain was a popular herding ground. The building of the camp thus started with staking off and fencing the designated area. Bit by bit pieces of the plant were moved in by tow and dump truck from Mille in Affar regional state, where the company had finished its previous road project, and in due course followed by the residential compound.

'We have learned from Mille', I was told the first week. The prefabricated housing from Beijing, which had been arranged all in a row in Mille, was now put up at angles. The row arrangement had made it too easy for thieves to sneak in, unseen. In the present lay-out one could see the bedroom doors through the office windows and keep an eye on the office and kitchen while standing in one of the bedrooms (see figure 3). In contrast to the camp in Mille, a rocky site devoid of vegetation and enclosed by a row of drums filled with bitumen, piled up two by two, the camp in Mehoni was surrounded with fencing pockmarked with holes, thanks to thieves who had broken into the compound in the past. The living area occupied a mere 20 per cent of the complete terrain, and was located on the south side, closest to the project road. The tower of the asphalt plant, nearly thirty metres high, in which the asphalt was stored in silos that kept the asphalt heated, could be seen from afar. At the base of the silos the fresh asphalt would be poured into dump trucks at ten minute intervals

[24] The cactus plants that surrounded the compound were *optunia*, also known as paddle cacti.

during production. Crows circled the tower in the mornings, while in the evenings the tower was a popular resort for pigeons, which were hunted by the Chinese and consumed for dinner.

The Chinese team consisted of six men and one woman. Liu Deye, 40 years old, was head of station (*zhanzhang*) and referred to as such by his colleagues. A former asphalt plant operator, Liu had been hired by the general manager to promote sales of the company's plants in Ethiopia, only to find out that most deals were struck outside the country. Wang Taihe, a 42-year-old mechanic, was the only member of the staff who did not come from Liaoning province. He had left his home province of Shandong for Liaoning twenty years before. Wang often lamented the fact that his wife, whom he had met in Dalian, earned three times the salary he did with an Internet sales portal for cosmetics. Not attracted to his wife's suggestion that he start working as a driver for her company, he argued that he was better off staying in Ethiopia. Li Hongde, 53 years old, was the oldest team member. Laid-off from work at a chemical plant, Li was seeking to optimize the last few years of his working life. He was also pressed to pay off his mortgage loan of a newly purchased flat in Dalian. Prime-truck driver Du Tianfu, 31 years old, had a nephew who had worked in Ethiopia before and who had discouraged his uncle, in vain, from going as well. After having spent five years in the navy and another five years driving trucks, taxis, and buses, Du decided to see more of the world. Plant operator Dai Tianhan was a 26-year-old computer science graduate who had also come to Ethiopia for a higher salary. He had recently purchased a house in Luxun. Dai became a father in May 2012, but was not allowed to return to China to see his daughter until August, when the building work was suspended due to the rainy season. Cook Lian Du, 37 years old, was a top chef who had exiled himself to Africa after a painful divorce. After finishing his three-year contract with Golden Roads he returned to China with the thought of opening a bakeshop. Accountant Gu Diemeng, 44 years old, was a divorced mother who had come to Ethiopia for a higher salary, in hopes of offering her 22-year-old daughter a better

future. In China Gu had also worked in the construction sector. She was familiar with, and enjoyed working in, this masculine environment. Purchase manager Bai Fu, 27 years old, joined in later, coming from the second project of Golden Roads in Debre Zeit. Lian Du was replaced by another Chinese cook in the late spring. The compound was also home to five dogs whose fur, matted with bitumen stains from rolling in puddles of the same, gave rise to the name 'bitumen dogs' ('*liqing gou*'). They barked indiscriminately at Ethiopians, and were feared by most workers, as well as visitors to the asphalt plant.

Depending on the number of hands needed, the gang of local workers consisted of 14 to 18 young men, headed by Worku from Addis Ababa, who had come over from the Mille project, together with plant operator assistant Bekele, driver Girma, and loader operator Kassahun. The remaining labourers were Tigrayans from Mehoni and its surroundings, who were responsible for hoisting bitumen drums, opening them on a small platform, and pushing them into the bitumen container. The men collected empty drums after production, rolled them with a kick of the foot to the corner of the area next to the living compound, where they were piled up accordingly. On the construction site the workers cleaned the base-course surface before the prime coat[25] was applied, and after spraying they laid stones on the surface to avoid cars driving over the fresh prime layer. The labourers were also expected to help with slaughtering pigs, repairing fences, building gates, and chasing thieves. A sign from foreman Worku or an alarming shout from manager Li Hongde sent the workers scurrying out into the cactuses, to catch the thieves and reclaim their loot.

The crew had one spare room for me, as a number of Chinese employees had left since the arrival of the company in Ethiopia in 2008. If not cancelled altogether, these positions had been filled by Ethiopians. Private Chinese companies in Africa like Golden Roads Enterprise displayed a trend towards localisation (Tang 2010). Due to unfamiliarity

[25] The prime coat was a bitumen-kerosene blend (in a 60 to 40 proportion) applied on top of the base-course and directly under the asphalt layer.

with the social environment and the country's labour market, initially Golden Roads and the other private firms on the project had brought in more Chinese personnel than needed. Hiring local labour also proved much cheaper. (One return ticket to China equalled the annual salary of an Ethiopian worker.) In Mille, the team had started off with 14 Chinese staff members, a number which was gradually reduced to seven. A second plant operator and a second mechanic, a truck manager, and two labour managers left the country. The general manager went back to run his company from China.

State-owned companies, by contrast, did not share this trend of local hiring. 'They [the headquarters] keep on sending me new employees. But I do not have space to house them, let alone work to assign to them!' project manager Gu once lamented.[26] Chinese SOEs have to digest an annual intake of college graduates, which meant that the companies' main incentive was to put employees to work, whether or not their hiring made sense economically.

The asphalt plant was, on the west and north sides, adjoined by heaps of variously sized graded aggregate, for use in the asphalt mix. Originally constructed in Xiamen, South-China, in 2008, the prefabricated asphalt plant was relatively friendly to its host environment. The exhaust fumes were redirected and used as binder material for the asphalt mix, a technique that was novel to most of the Ethiopian consultant engineers. The company itself produced asphalt plants in Liaoning province, north-east China, but the general manager decided to purchase a plant from southern China, due to considerably lower transportation costs and better adaptability to the hot climate foreseen in Mille. Temperatures in Mehoni were much cooler than in Affar, ranging from 20 to 30 degrees Celsius. The coldest months were December and January, with 21 degrees Celsius; the warmest were July and August, with 29 degrees Celsius on average (measurements from the AH-project laboratory 2010). Golden Roads was a private company, a subsidiary that had grown out of a Chinese-Japanese

[26] The project manager was employed by RCE, the Chinese state-owned contractor.

joint venture and manufacturer of construction machinery. Initially producing solely for the Japanese market, the enterprise had sold 400 asphalt plants in China in the past two decades (2006 was the peak year, when 41 plants were sold). More recently, sales had receded due to China's slow-down in road construction. The electric power consumed by the plant was provided by five generators in a shed next to the plant; the generators, which roared all day long, also produced electricity for the residential compound. They were only switched off for an hour or two, to cool down after production, or on days without production, beginning at around noon. The asphalt plant had cost CNY 11 million. In Mille Golden Roads Enterprise had made good profits and was able to recoup its initial investment. This project, however, was less lucrative, as materials (chiefly bitumen), the basis by which most revenues could be made, were purchased and owned by the contractor.

Next to the tower and the drive for the dump trucks stood the cabin of the Chinese plant operator, Dai Tianhan, who referred to himself as a robot and who only left his cabin for the bathroom as well as breakfast and dinner in the dining room. He also slept in his cabin, which was filled with cigarette smoke and heavy metal music. In off-work hours Dai, who had graduated in computer science, programmed with SQLite or Java and explored the Chinese stock market in which he invested part of his income. When leaving his cabin for the residential area, Dai had to cross the compound between islands of bitumen drums lined up on both sides. One wing of the living compound consisted of bedrooms running from A to F. Room F was a storage room of great attraction to thieves, and therefore completely sealed off. (After the theft of twenty jerry cans of engine oil, the window was fitted with an extra layer of wire netting.) Room E was the bedroom of plant manager Liu Deye. And room D was occupied by accountant Gu Diemeng. Room A was shared by the mechanic and the cook. Room B was the room of Li Hongde. Room C was my room, filled with three bunk beds and stuffed with goods from China, from mouth masks to toilet paper to instant noodles. The

bunk beds were covered with thin mattresses and flowered polyester blankets, also from China. My mirror, a former wing mirror of a dump truck, was stuck to the wall with duct tape. Responsibility for cleaning the bedrooms fell to the crew, as local cleaners were distrusted. The second north-facing wing housed the cook assistant's room, the kitchen, the dining room, and the office. The latter was filled with a desk island, a table tennis table, and a karaoke set, consisting of two loudspeakers and a TV screen. Perpendicular to the office stood the mechanic's workshop.

The favourite (most frequented) entry to the compound for thieves was the south-west corner of the living area, behind the truck graveyard, where a one-wheeled trailer wagon languished along with an idle emulsified asphalt machine, disabled dump trucks (without tyres or other spare parts), and a tow truck that had crashed in a fatal accident near Mille, resulting in the death of one of the Chinese employees. Behind the toilet shack in the same corner lay the pushed-over fencing that provided an easy entry point for thieves. His first night of service at the plant, Policeman Hagos figured that thieves were most likely to enter the compound from this side, and the next morning he ordered workers to put the guard shack on the shipping container, next to the bathroom and toilets. This vantage point ostensibly gave guards a good overview of the living area, except for the fact that the camp and its surroundings were pitch-dark at night. Four construction lights – two attached to the plant tower, two from support stands in the living area – would have provided lighting. The lights had been brought from China on the assumption that construction work would continue late into the night. But night shifts were uncommon in Ethiopia, and so the lights were never used as intended. Then, in an attempt to reduce theft, the Chinese began switching off the construction lights, arguing that the lights simply helped thieves to scout around and see if the crew was up or away.

Nights were also filled with eerie sounds. Apart from the incessant roaring of the generators in the background, we were subject to the sounds of barking dogs, laughing hyenas, and empty drums shifting in the pile. Deep into the night we could hear the cracking sound of dogs jumping on the mineral powder sacks, their tails chafing along the thin walls of the prefabricated housing. During the daytime, we were startled by the occasional blast from the nearby quarry. In the rainy season, rain beating loudly on the blue corrugated iron roofs drowned out all other sounds.

This isolation of the compound was experienced by the Chinese migrants as comparable to prison, and their life in rural Ethiopia to life in custody. Zhao Zhijie, a surveyor working for the contractor, explained:

> Our scope of activities (*huodong fanwei*) is, apart from the building site, this compound (*zhe ge yuan*). There are a few who are a bit older and like to go for a walk. We might play basketball, table tennis, watch a movie, play a video game, eat, sleep.… Our scope is just within a couple of hundred metres by a couple of hundred metres. It is like a prison. In fact, it *is* a prison. We cannot move. We are just inside. If you do not go out [to the building site], you are just here. Consultant office, our office, like today: consultant office, our office. That's it. The prison is that big. Only, you can go out for exercise and fresh air as you wish (*suiyi fangfeng*). (Zhao Zhijie, 17 June 2012)

Freedom was only felt *within* the compound. Not only the restriction of physical movement but also, as Zhao indicates, the monotony of daily life, heightened a feeling of seclusion. Compounding the prison-like sense of isolation was the fact that the work week was a full seven days. Work days from seven in the morning to seven in the evening (excluding overtime) left little spare time to do as one wished.

In addition to the monotonous daily routine, respondents cited the inability to consume as another factor in their sense of isolation. 'There is nothing to spend my salary on', was a common refrain. 'There are no socks to put on, no clothes to wear, no drinks to drink, no food to eat, no things to buy', as surveyor Cui Binhai put it bluntly. Consumption in post-reform China has gained importance in nursing individual desires as well as social networks

(Davis 2000). Moreover, consumer products have become important markers of status (Y. Yan 2009: 210) in a society in which social classes are no longer defined by workplace or political orientation but by the consuming power of individual Chinese (Zhang 2010). This key role played by consumption in present-day China accounted for the unfulfilled wishes of migrants in Africa to consume. Consuming power was moreover a measure of distinction that differentiated Chinese employers from local Ethiopian employees, signifying the relative wealth of the former. In a similar fashion, Chinese higher-level managers were able to distinguish themselves from lower segments of the migrant community by consumption, albeit this was hampered by the theft of shoes and cloth as well as luxury items, and by the subsequent inability to replace the stolen items. Personal possessions subject to theft might have been trivial yet they were highly visible, which made their lack even more painful. Theft, then, also had a powerful symbolic impact – it made the Chinese camps and their residents appear vulnerable and impoverished.

The lack of consumer power was exacerbated by the lack of entertainment, or opportunities for sociability, both of which made migrants feel restricted in the scope of activities they were able to undertake.

> The hardship they [Chinese in Ethiopia] bear is that this place is like a prison. You cannot go anywhere. And there are no recreation facilities, like the cinema in China, or KTV (Karaoke TV). The hardship is that everything is dry and dull (*kuzao*), but the normal things like food, cloths, living place, and so forth, are all okay.… If you earn 10,000 CNY in China you cannot save it. But if you earn 10,000 here, you can save it all. So there are advantages and disadvantages. Moreover, to live in a camp like this, I think that locals envy [them]. I remember once, one of the people from [Mehoni] court came to visit the camp. He said he really liked our offices. And then I realize, ay, I felt really sorry. All of a sudden I felt that I was very lucky; but there are too many bugs here, they are stitching me all the time. (Jing Fang, 21 May 2012)

Many compounds did have recreation facilities, such as a karaoke set, a satellite TV, a table tennis room, and a basketball court, in the case of RCE. Entertainment was, however, associated with going *out*. Respondents contended that there was nothing worth going out to,

or going out for, except a glass of beer or Axumite (Ethiopian wine) mixed with coca cola in a local coffee house, or 'to look for women in town' ('*zai zhen li zhao nüde*'), meaning prostitutes or *shermut'a* (or *shele*), as they were referred to by Ethiopian workers. Alcohol consumption was allowed in the compounds and visits to prostitutes occurred only on an occasional basis in the compounds where I resided. Most evenings were filled with playing video games like Defence of the Ancients, or mah-jong, and chatting with friends on the internet. Migrants usually stayed in. The asphalt plant crew only left the compound for construction work, including the application of the prime coat, the surface treatment of road verges, and the ferrying of aggregate from the quarry to the plant. The tarmac itself was placed by Duyin Enterprise, a subcontracting company from Shandong. On Thursdays the cook left the compound for the market in Mehoni. Most products, however, were purchased in Mekele or Addis Ababa. Du Tianfu and Liu Deye commuted daily to Mehoni to collect labourers and Policeman Hagos, or to pay a visit to the police station. But Mehoni was largely observed from the car. What aggravated the isolation from the local community were the incidents of theft.

2.2 Fear and fortification

Outbreaks of theft provoked such feelings of anxiety and distress among Chinese asphalt plant staff members that, in a determined effort to prevent theft, the physical layout of both the residential compound and the plant area were gradually transformed into a fortress. With an excavator borrowed from the adjacent quarry of Wuhe Enterprise, the crew dug a trench three metres deep and two metres wide around the residential area. The purpose of the trench, which was also used as a casual garbage dump, was to keep out thieves. The fence around the terrain was solidified with wooden poles and reinforced with extra iron wire. Bedroom and office windows were covered with wire netting. Preventive measures were not only taken

with respect to the built space but also the ‘inward’ movement of possessions, that is, items that were considered private property of the company or its staff members. Things from outside the residential area moved inside the compound, while objects located in the public spaces were placed or stored in private bedrooms. Such safety measures, however, served to provoke and challenge thieves. New incidents of theft thus led to new preventive measures. A continuous back and forth of attack and defence resulted in the gradual fortification of the entire compound.

The fate of pigs and sugar will illustrate the point. Upon their arrival in Mehoni, the asphalt plant crew had received two piglets as a welcome gift from co-subcontractor Jianghe. (Pigs were rare in Ethiopia, as neither Orthodox-Christians nor Muslims eat pork.) The piglets were kept inside a small circle of bitumen drums which had been covered with scrap wood to guard against the sun, in the far corner of the terrain. The piglets disappeared two days later. During my first stay at the plant the crew bought another pig (of about 150 kg for ETB 6,000) from Jianghe, which raised pigs for sale – having earned about ETB 1 million at their previous road project near Addis Ababa solely through pig sales. The bitumen drum pig shed was then moved in closer, to the living area, in order to keep an eye on the animal. The pigs and their shed were simply part of the inward migration of valuable items.

Another such item was sugar. Before breakfast the cook’s assistant set a plastic container filled with sugar on the dining table to sweeten the home-made soymilk. Every morning the cook refilled the container with, at most, ten tablespoons, keeping the large sugar sack in his own bedroom, which had in the meantime evolved into a smelly food storage outpost. Sugar often went missing not only from the plant’s kitchen but also from the more luxurious and better-stocked kitchen of RCE, the contractor, as well as from the kitchens in the corrugated iron shacks of the poorer Chinese subcontractors. Sugar was a valued commodity. Ethiopians were used to putting up to three teaspoons in their tea and coffee;

hardly any locals, however poor, drank their tea or coffee unsweetened. The asphalt crew thus tried to keep sugar in stock. They brought it in from Maychew, the larger administrative town located in the mountains on the Italian-built road. There, sugar cost ETB 12 per kilogram in a specialised shop and was, according to the cook, cheaper than the sugar from Mehoni, for which he had been charged ETB 34 per kilogram. Regardless of the cook's vigilance, the sugar container was always emptied sooner than expected.

Trying to guard items from theft meant having to move them from the plant's territory to the living compound, or from spaces frequented by Ethiopians (the kitchen, the mechanic's workshop and the office) into the Chinese workers' private bedrooms. Just as the pigs were moved from the far end of the compound to the living area, and the sugar from the kitchen to the cook's bedroom, the jerry cans with engine oil were relocated from their storage site next to the mechanic's workshop to the completely sealed storage bedroom, as were the new truck tyres, the flasks of oil solvent, and spare parts for vehicles. The blower for cleaning the base-course surface before applying the prime coat was moved from the mechanic's workshop to the office, as were the accumulator batteries, and the welding helmet. The washing powder was taken out of the kitchen and placed in the bedroom of the cook, together with other food stuffs and seasoning. And the cotton bag with work tools of the labourers who processed the bitumen drums to plates was moved from outside into the office. Prime truck driver Du Tianfu also moved from the bedroom he shared with labour manager Li Hongde to the office shortly after three laptops were stolen from the office desks during a crew meeting that was being held in the dining room.

The impact of theft on the lives of compound residents can hardly be overstated. Emotions of fear, frustration, and, at times, anger were provoked by increased attempts at theft and exacerbated by social isolation, all of which had repercussions in the body (cf. Bourdieu 1977). Intense experiences of what Chinese sensed as injustice led to the

embodiment of social suffering (Tapias 2006), a process I will return to later on. In any case, crew members developed defensive tactics that surfaced in discourse and, more importantly, were internalised in demeanour. Hiding, for instance, became routine. Objects that were not visible were less likely to get stolen; hence, windows were closed and makeshift curtains – old bed sheets strung from iron wire – were drawn upon leaving bedrooms. Laptops were covered by the flowered polyester blankets or stowed in locked suitcases. I used to place my computer and photo camera in the broken washing machine in my bedroom. Over time, hiding evolved into a custom that included counting. In fact, counting became part of the daily routine at the asphalt plant: counting bitumen drums, drum plates, socks on the washing line, and jerry cans of cooking and engine oil. (That I, too, had internalised certain of these actions I discovered once I was back from the field. I remember, for instance, feeling awkward and uncomfortable leaving my laptop on my desk when walking out of my bedroom in Oxford.) Vigilance had become a priority in the life of the compound. In May 2012, the top chef from Dalian went back to China. His three-year contract had expired. The crew, together with the general manager in China, discussed his replacement. Cooking skills were not an issue. There were enough locals who could cook Chinese food. More crucial was that there be a Chinese cook who would watch the compound when the rest of the crew was out on the building site.

2.3 Theft defined

Standing on the heap with the finest asphalt aggregate afforded one a fine view of the sea of bitumen drums grouped in islands. The drums covered at least eighty per cent of the asphalt plant's entire area, for good reason. Bitumen was cheaper to order in large amounts. The drums had travelled a long way from Iran, where they were found with increasing popularity in Mehoni and surroundings. Farm boys came at night to knock holes in the drums by

standing on the edges of the islands and throwing them to the ground. Filled drums were too heavy to carry, but empty drums were another matter. When most of the sticky substance had spilled over the ground during the day, the boys returned the second night to pick up the almost empty drum, disappearing with it between the bushes of paddle cactus that surrounded the asphalt plant complex. Bitumen stains were left, silent witnesses to the raiding party, on the ground. The target, then, had been the drum and not its contents. One drum was worth ETB 100. While the bitumen itself was more costly, nearly ETB 3,000 per drum content, it did not sell on the local market. Theft was nothing if not practical in nature.

Theft, however, appeared to imply more than the mere fulfilment of a thief's material or economic needs. Theft put the authority of the Chinese employer to the test, that is, many incidents of theft seemed to be aimed at making statements. Take, for instance, the gate theft. The front gate to the compound was stolen twice in the same month. Both times the wooden board with STOP written on it was torn off and left on the ground. Taking away the front door meant inviting others to steal. It also left the Chinese in a weak position not so much financially – the gate could easily be replaced – as symbolically, evoking the helplessness of those who were in fact most powerful in terms of resources. After the two incidents, the asphalt plant crew opted for a cheaper gate. In the afternoon Li Hongde ordered his workers to build a wooden framework with a diagonal cross, to be placed in the gaping hole left behind by the stolen gate. Tellingly, the wooden gate evoked an image of impoverishment on the compound. Such incidents of theft and the statements they made were addressed to the Chinese as a collective. Similarly, they seemed the combined attempts of residents from surrounding settlements.

A third feature of theft was its cumulative and persistent nature. During the month I kept the logbook, at least every other day something went missing; on some days, there were not one but two occurrences. One example of the persistent character of theft was the stealing

of mineral powder bags. After use in asphalt production, the empty sacks of mineral powder were thrown on a heap outside the mineral powder shack, for recycling. Locals had cut a hole in the fence close to the heap, through which they could haul bunches of sacks and drop them on the ground on the other side of the fence. By daytime women and children, stained with white powder on their hands, faces, and dresses, went through the heap to look for undamaged sacks they could use at home or sell to neighbours or traders. Day in day out, at least one or two people at a time would be browsing through the heap. The Chinese grew blasé towards this form of theft, as it was not a priority (one undamaged bag was worth ETB 2 or 3), at least not until the contractor switched suppliers. Originally, the contractor bought mineral powder from a daughter company in Addis Ababa when two brothers from Fujian were found who were willing to start producing mineral powder on-site, next to the quarry and close to the asphalt plant, an arrangement which would save on transportation costs. Recycling then became important, as the sacks could be reused directly by the brothers. The undamaged sacks were then tied together in bundles and stacked next to the vegetable garden in the residential compound where they served as pillows for the dogs, until they were collected by the brothers in their Isuzu. Only then did the stealing of mineral powder bags stop.

2.4 You steal, we steal

I cannot say much about the motives of thieves, but judging from their actions, I think it is fair to conclude that these incidents of theft should be seen as *counter*-acts in response to Chinese employers and their activities in the region. As such, theft was a form of communication. Perhaps we can say that, from the thieves' perspective, it levelled the playing field. Chinese and Ethiopians certainly took advantage of each other. 'The Chinese are like eating sugarcane', Tesfay Bekele, a consultant staff member who supervised the quality of

road-base materials, once remarked. 'They chew on it, suck out all the sweet sugar, and then spit out the rest [of the] bits'. Having worked for the Chinese on the Addis Ababa Ring Road Project, Tesfay had developed a strong dislike for his former employers. He approached theft as a form of negative reciprocity; he saw the Chinese as thieves, who, he used to say, stole from the quality of the road, the safety of the local personnel, and the wages of workers. Ironically, Tesfay's statement reflects the Chinese saying that someone who steals a coin (or a slice of bread) becomes a criminal, whereas someone who steals the country becomes a king. In other words, the powerful steal the invisible yet important; the powerless steal the visible but trivial and unimportant. In Tesfay's eyes the conduct and the practices of the Chinese explained and, more importantly, justified theft of construction materials, such as base-course material, cement, and masonry stones. Taking away something from the other often implied taking away something immaterial, such as integrity or authority. Theft violated or openly questioned the authority of Chinese employers and left them in a weak position.

As much as theft was a form of communication, it was also the cause of miscommunication. Regardless of whether Chinese migrants understood the implicit messages behind incidents of theft, they viewed theft as part and parcel of underdevelopment and poverty rather than as the consequence of their own behaviour. Convinced that they were doing only good to the region by stimulating economic growth, the Chinese saw theft as ingratitude on the part of the local community. When Peng Gaofei, a site engineer responsible for the road base-course works, was asked what had surprised him most in Ethiopia, he answered:

> They [locals] don't understand everything we are doing for them. Instead they bear grudges against us. You feel like…you feel that everything is not worth it. We came to assist in building up (*yuanjian*) [the country]. We came to help make the country more prosperous (*fanrong*), more rich and powerful (*fuqiang*). But everything we do for you [locals], we don't expect anything in return. Instead, you say we are robbing from you, and you hate us [Chinese].… Everything we do is for you, but you think otherwise; you think we are grabbing your resources and stealing your money. That is what really surprised me. (Peng Gaofei, 31 May 2012)

Peng's view was representative of migrant views. In contrast to what Chinese diplomatic narratives on Chinese engagement in Africa have preached, Chinese engineers on-site like Peng Gaofei perceived their work as philanthropic. 'We are here for them, not for us', uttered a Chinese foreman. 'China doesn't care. We are only losing money here. However, with this road we can raise *their* salaries and stimulate *their* economy' (emphasis in original). That the Chinese would have to pay for stolen steel bars and cement, or bitumen wasted by bitumen drum theft, explained the managers' frustration. Many of the Chinese road builders saw themselves as introducing development in a region that, in their eyes, lagged behind, only to find their development ideal met with no response, or at least not with the response they had hoped for or expected.

'Local people think we are wealthy', was the bitter lamentation of Chinese employees when addressing theft. Theft was connected to economic necessity, and poverty was therefore seen as the main incentive for stealing. Chinese migrants adopted a socio-economic approach to theft, placing Ethiopian society in a (historically) different, lower stage of development (cf. Fabian 1983; Wolf 1982). 'People here are just poor. Forty years ago it was the same in China. There were also many of us who stole under Mao Zedong', explained a Chinese mechanic. Migrants ranked their own country higher in terms of socio-economic development, reflecting an assumption of teleological development (of populations and individuals alike). Development was seen as engendered by individual commitment, especially with concern to labour and productivity. Nevertheless, as a teacher of social mores, the Ethiopian state was held responsible for its failure to educate its citizens. Chinese migrants had grown up in a social environment in which the state had been strongly engaged with raising people's *suzhi* (Nyíri 2006; Murphy 2004). Development was as much the responsibility, or duty, of the state as of the individual. The state or the quality of a country

was therefore directly related to the conduct or the *suzhi* of its people. Not only did value judgements about the one influence value judgments about the other, such judgements were functional in the sense that placing blame on one or the other made incidents of theft easier to deal with.

Theft was also held to explain laziness, and vice versa. If the Ethiopian would work hard, he would not steal or need to steal, Chinese argued. Notably, Ethiopian laziness was contrasted with Chinese diligence.

> If they [locals] see someone wearing a fancy top (pointing at her own glittery orange top), they want to have it instantly. They take it from you. They steal rather than thinking like a Chinese: 'I work hard first to earn enough money so that I am able to buy that top or even a fancier one myself'. This gives satisfaction. But the locals do not think like that. They want to have something all at once. (Gu Diemeng, 27 May 2012)

Gu's illustration reveals the tendency of Chinese migrants to perceive the other as a singular, homogenised category, referred to simply as 'they'. Gu asserts that wanting something without being willing to work is a typical group characteristic of Ethiopian workers; there were exceptions to the rule, however, and these were often individuals. Gu mentioned four labourers who were, in her eyes, diligent, because they bore responsibilities as sole bread winners of their households. Gu's depiction also reminds one of the *suzhi* discourse and the submission of the individual to (neo-liberal) production. The ideal of self-improvement also comes to the fore, in which bettering oneself is achieved by submitting to work duties. The ultimate reward in this cycle is consumption, as in, for instance, being able to buy a fancy (or fancier) top.

This homogenous 'they' was not without a certain degree of shading. Chinese who had spent a considerable amount of time in Ethiopia were inclined to compare Tigrayans to Ethiopians of different ethnic categories, for instance. A number of Chinese workers involved on the project, including the asphalt plant crew, had worked in Mille in Affar regional state before coming to Mehoni. Affar is a hot and dry area, home to cattle nomads, people with a

darker skin and smaller physique than Amharas and Tigrayans. At Golden Road's asphalt plant in Mille, the Affari were responsible for mineral powder processing and cleaning chores, whereas the Amharas were assigned to the tougher physical labour of bitumen processing. In Mehoni, the local work force consisted mainly of Tigrayans, except for three Amharas who were brought over from Mille, and the plant operator assistant, who was of Oromo origin. The unskilled and semi-skilled labourers came from Mehoni and surroundings. Tigrayans and their conduct were frequently compared with the Affari, to the benefit of the latter. (Albeit aware of the differences between Amharas and Tigrayans, Chinese managers did not normally distinguish between these ethnic groups.) Affari were seen as uncivilised (*yeman*) yet honest and pure (*chunpu*), in contrast to the Tigrayans, who were perceived as more civilised yet villainous, at least in their conduct towards Chinese. The Affari stole less, and when they stole, they did so without bad intentions, Du Tianfu argued. Moreover, they merely stole 'invaluable' things. In contrast, Tigrayans stole with the intent of doing harm to the outsider.

The Affari were accorded an even lower stage of development; however, they were seen as having not yet lost their innocence. The language used by the Chinese to describe the Affari is reminiscent of the noble savage discourse (Ellingson 2001). In a nostalgic fashion, the Affari were recalled as honest and pure, whereas the Tigrayans were seen as spoiled by the state, which acted on their behalf. On other occasions Chinese used similar words when talking about Amharas or Tigrayans, referring to the emotionality of labourers, rather than their qualities or weaknesses related to actual work or output. Thus, Chinese described their workers as moody (*fanmen*). Whether positive or negative, these descriptions often implied a lack of discipline and naivety on the part of the labourers, who (in contrast to the Chinese) were unable to set aside their feelings and concentrate on the work at hand. 'Ethiopians are happy', a Chinese grader operator once uttered, waiting for his labourers to pick out the large

stones from the base-course mix and throw them to the side, before he could continue. The young men were joking around. ‘They don’t have worries, like we do’. I asked why. ‘Chinese have to work; otherwise they have nothing to eat’. I sensed here a tone of self-pity, but also of ‘knowing better’ what life elsewhere, in a more developed world, was like. Assumptions about Africa in relation to the world at large were summed up by an Ethiopian friend who worked for a Chinese leather manufacturer: ‘The Chinese see Africa as a large, dark wilderness or bush where animals live, many wild animals, like tigers and elephants. They do not expect civilization in Africa when they come here’.

The behaviour of local authorities reinforced Chinese assumptions about area settlements and local labourers. Whereas the civic authorities in Affar were held to be supportive of Chinese activities, their Tigrayan counterparts were seen as actively opposing the construction work. The stance of town authorities with respect to theft was perceived as passive at best and thwarting at worst. Rather than discouraging theft with a just punishment that reflected law and order, in Chinese eyes, the authorities were seen as encouraging theft.

> What makes us very angry is that the locals discriminate against us. They don’t care about theft if it only harms the Chinese. They just do not care. Moreover, it seems like the government is inciting them to steal. This is dreadful. It makes me furious. In China, you can steal, but after getting caught you will also receive a severe punishment. (Fang Lei, materials engineer, 2 June 2012)

> There are many incidents of theft. Local employees steal petrol and change the new tyres of our cars and truck for old ones. One time we caught someone in the act and took a photograph. We went to court. But there was nothing we could do. Judges support local people. (Xie Yang, 28 September 2011)

The local state was expected to appreciate the importance of the road for economic development and prosperity, and to understand that every attempt to thwart the construction work would cause delay in a region that, in Chinese eyes, desperately needed developing. Incomprehension of the stance of local authorities deepened frustration on the part of the

Chinese, whose outlet for these emotions, as I will show later, were plaintive narratives of suffering.

Theft also gained a comparative quality in a migrant community that became increasingly stratified. Chinese staff invariably compared the situation in camps along the project road, and ranked them according to severity and frequency of theft. Drawing an inherent link between theft and (bad) management, positions were evaluated relative to others, to arrive at the conclusion that stealing in one's own camp was not as severe as in the neighbours' camp. The contractor was especially eager to point out that theft in private subcontractors' camps was more acute. 'They don't know how to deal with their workers', remarked the project manager about Qimo Construction, a private subcontractor. The contractor's materials engineer simply scorned the asphalt plant: 'They cannot manage blacks' ('*tamen guan bu zhu heiren*'). In reality, the contractor's camp was as much frequented by thieves as the subcontractors' camps, although the items stolen differed, due to the nature of the works undertaken by the respective crews. Locals themselves did not seem to differentiate between Chinese individuals or camps.

2.5 'Every local is essentially a thief'

Those who knew the asphalt plant best were former or present employees of Golden Roads, which, in turn, meant that thieves who were former or present employees knew the plant by heart. Incidents of theft, then, were often tied to discontent about wages or disgruntlement with managerial practices. 'Ethiopian workers steal because their wages are low. And Chinese keep wages low because Ethiopian workers steal', an Ethiopian employee of a Chinese company put it poignantly. The situation in south-eastern Tigray was, however, not unique. Theft is a common and recurring phenomenon in industrial settings characterised by oppressive managerial regimes. Pilfering also occurs in present-day Chinese industrial

settings. Kim notes how the theft of fabric from the warehouse of a Korean clothing manufacturer in Qingdao, China, created a schism between management and shop floor workers, who were suspected of using connections with the local village gang to smuggle fabric out of the factory (Kim 2013). Pun describes how the management of an electronics factory in Shenzhen regarded theft as a bad habit of country people, and workers were thoroughly inspected when entering the workplace. At issue, Pun contends, was a conflict between notions of private property (Pun 2005). What management saw as company property, including waste products, workers perceived as collective property. Management placed repeated emphasis on the fact that waste products belonged to the company and must not be taken away to reuse.

In southeastern Tigray, Chinese management seemed to have given up on thwarting the theft of waste products. So, for instance, the collection of large stones from the sub-base aggregate was generally tolerated – the stones had to be removed anyway before grading could start – as was the appropriation of tarmac that was cut off from the edges of the asphalt layer right after placement. (Still hot and mouldable, the tarmac was used by local residents and cast in front of doorposts or in front yards.) Chinese employers were, however, less tolerant of appropriating materials that had yet to be used for construction, such as base-course material, cement and steel bars, or waste products that could yield money, such as bitumen drums. The theft of such building materials was more than a misunderstanding about the notion of private property. Theft appeared to be a conscious and calculated act of defiance against company management.

The blurring of boundaries between workers and thieves, or Tigrayans and thieves in general, was reflected in language, and in one word, in particular: *alibaba*. Replacing the Amharic word '*leba*' and the Chinese word '*xiaotou*', '*alibaba*' was used to mean 'thief' by both Chinese and Ethiopians. Most Chinese argued that the word was local, whereas the

locals stated that the word must come from the Chinese. (Only two persons mentioned its Arab origin.) The concept was ascribed various grammatical functions, but mostly appeared as a noun. It was not conjugated, as is common in Chinese grammar, where the context usually indicates the number. In plural one said, for instance: '*Mehoni too much alibaba allä*' (if said by an Ethiopian), or 'Too much *alibaba* no good' (if said by a Chinese). In the singular, one could say, like the accountant said about one guard: '*Zebena alibaba allä'*. ('The guard is a thief'). Used as a verb, the word appeared in 'No *alibaba*!' meaning 'No stealing!' Also used as a verb, *alibaba* remained unconjugated. Since its adaptation in popular parlance, the word had taken on a life of its own. The concept was used by locals as a form of veiled criticism of the Chinese, who used *alibaba* not only for thieves but also for workers who did not listen or who did not perform their tasks according to expectations. Locals were involved in a sort of 'linguistic resistance' (Gal 1993), by using the word against the Chinese. On the streets young men shouted '*Alibaba*! *Alibaba*!' teasingly to the Chinese (including me). The children or teenagers then often ran away quickly or hid behind bushes, knowing full-well that what had been said carried with it a bad connotation.

The blurring of boundaries between workers and thieves resulted in deep-rooted feelings of distrust. The asphalt plant crew distanced itself, emotionally and socially, from the work force. Chinese managers attempted to eliminate theft by dismissing suspected workers. An employee accused of theft was either fired on the spot, or left in his position without warning or remark. If the person in question was caught or suspected again, he or she would be dismissed. But dismissal proved a temporary method. Everybody could essentially be a thief, as one manager put it. Meanwhile, theft continued unabated.

2.6 Solving theft

Chinese attitudes towards thieves remained ambivalent. 'They are just boys', Chinese sometimes sighed. When Hagos was patrolling the compound at night, especially, the asphalt plant crew grew more blasé towards theft. At other times they became furious, especially when awakened by thieves every second night and reminded of the resulting financial losses: theft at the asphalt plant mounted to an estimated cost of several hundreds of thousands (ETB). Accumulated acts of stealing were perceived as particularly upsetting. The alleged theft of twenty jerry cans of engine oil by Gebre, one of the most trusted workers, aroused disagreement among the asphalt plant staff. The morning after the theft, the labourers were called together. Gebre was late. Foreman Worku and loader operator Kassahun did not know anything about the theft, but the other workers pointed unanimously at Gebre. When he arrived at the plant, Gebre withdrew from the discussion and remained silent. At the time, the 19-year-old Gebre was prime truck assistant, an introverted but friendly and forthcoming youth. The Chinese, including his manager, the prime truck driver, were attached to him and appreciated his hard-working mentality. After the workers were sent off, plant manager Liu Deye and Gu Diemeng insisted on firing Gebre. His direct superior Du Tianfu disagreed and managed to convince his colleagues to let him stay, at least provisionally, arguing that if he were to be fired, he would, potentially at least, steal as an act of sheer retaliation. Gebre was a prime suspect: he knew the terrain through and through. The problem was proving that he was the thief. 'We did not have any proof', explained prime truck driver Du Tianfu later. 'The workers might point at him to protect themselves. They know we trust him'. Gebre was left in his position.

In actual fact, security personnel were most frequently found guilty of theft. 'In the end there is not one guard (*bao'an*) who has clean hands', said engineer Lian Du of the contractor assigned to the asphalt works. The asphalt plant employed six guards, divided over

two 24-hour shifts. A workday started and ended at six o'clock in the evening, just before the Chinese retreated to the dining room. At the start of a shift, each guard received an electric torch, which had to be returned the next morning. The most trustworthy guard was asked to watch the residential compound, while the others were assigned to guard the plant complex: one to keep an eye on the petrol tank, the other to watch the bitumen drums. The salaries of guards were low – an incentive, according to Ethiopian workers, to steal. During my second stay at the plant the salary of the guards went up from ETB 16.67 to 20 or 25 per shift, depending on individual performance, that is, mainly loyalty and commitment. The time between shifts was also compensated, meaning the guards received pay for 168 hours per week, making their monthly income in the range of ETB 1,000 to 1,500. Guards were recruited by Worku. The possession of a Kalashnikov, known locally as *klash*, was an unspoken requirement for the job. (The Russian firearms had likely been brought to the North in the 1970s when the Soviet Union strengthened ties with Ethiopia, which, at the time, was fighting against the independence of Eritrea.) A gun hung from a leather strap on the shoulder of every respected man in the region.

The ages of the guards, varying between 35 and 45, differed from the workers, who commonly aged between 17 and 25. The guards were armed, but it was the workers, all significantly younger, who were faster at picking up the Chinese language and thus more astute in their communication with the Chinese. Even so, the lack of a common language was cause for countless awkward situations and miscommunications, resulting in mistrust on both sides. Guards were often caught sleeping (which was not surprising, considering their work schedule). 'You can let your eyes drop in the afternoon, but you should not do so at night time', warned the accountant in Chinese after several bitumen drums had been stolen. One of the guards stared at her with a drowsy look. 'Now sleep. *Mata* no sleep' ('*mata*' meaning

evening), she repeated. The guard nodded, but it remained unclear if he had understood the message.

With a convenient view of the whole compound, both plant and the living area, the heap with the finest aggregate for the asphalt mix was the favourite spot of the guards. They sat wrapped up in a grimy white cloth, their bodies completely covered except for their heads and the barrel of their Kalashnikov, which stuck out of the cloth. When I opened my bedroom door in the morning, I could see the guards dozing in position on the heap. The Chinese thought of ways to improve the commitment of the guards, one of which was the bullet reclaim and the catcher's bonus. Bullet costs were returned the next morning or right after a shot was fired. The guard received ETB 30 per bullet. (One bullet cost ETB 25 on the local market.) 'The five birr extra is an incentive to catch more thieves', explained accountant Gu Diemeng. This policy was implemented more recently in addition to the 'catcher's bonus' of 200 birr per thief. But outside thieves were rarely caught, not least because they were younger and more agile than the guards, and familiar with the area. Usually such thieves managed to escape. Still, it was often the guards themselves who were involved in stealing. Guard Hailu was held responsible for the second gate theft. He was fired two days after the incident.

The asphalt plant crew seldom took suspected thieves to the local police station or reported incidents of theft, largely because they were convinced that it would make no difference. The hesitance to report theft to the Mehoni police reflected the lack of trust in local authorities. Within the month that I kept the logbook, only one theft of sixteen instances was reported. The Chinese were at their wits' end after the main gate had been stolen for the second time. And yet their trip to the police station was in vain. The asphalt plant team deemed themselves fortunate to have found Policeman Hagos, whom they saw as impartial and therefore different from other officials. Hagos was perceived as a friend. Asking the

contractor or other Chinese companies for help did not seem a viable option. For one thing, they struggled with the same problems. Moreover, pride seemed to curb the crew from speaking about theft to other Chinese. Thus, in the perceived absence of support from officials and friends, Golden Road's staff members developed their own measures against theft. Caught thieves were usually taken to the office in the residential compound and beaten, mostly by Li Hongde and Du Tianfu, sometimes by the guard who caught them, still angry from the pursuit. Corporeal punishment seemed a way to channel anger and was seen as the best way to scare thieves away. Afterwards, the young men were escorted by the security men to the front gate and let go of. Most measures against theft were largely defensive and preventive in nature: wire netting in front of windows; a red stripe painted on the bitumen drums to see which ones had gone missing; more guards and better incentives for them to catch thieves; a trench around the compound; hiding, counting and watching possessions. All measures, regardless of intent, that resulted in the gradual fortification and thus further isolation of the camp.

3. Straddling Ethnic Frontiers

On 13 October 2011 the project manager sent out the following letter, titled 'Notice of guidelines in regard to respect for local customs and obedience by the local law',[27] to all the subcontractors. Liu Deye, manager of Golden Road's asphalt plant, had stuck the notice on the wall in the office, next to another letter from the project department, stipulating rules on alcohol consumption and penalties for alcohol abuse.

[27] The title of the document in Mandarin was: '*guanyu zhongshen zunzhong difang fengsu, zunshou difang falü fagui de tongzhi*'.

To all sub-crews (*fenbu*):

Recently the project department has received various complaints from the local government about incidents in the compounds that involved behaviour of Chinese managers and their employees that runs counter to local customs and is considered illegal by the local law. Here I would like to reiterate that every crew is expected to attach importance to improving the management of Chinese employees and local employees in order to avoid unnecessary disputes and consequences.

1. Improve the management of local employees, in regard to recruitment of local workers, employment and dismissal. Do this in line with the labour law and the regulations of the project department, and in doing so improve actual circumstances in unison, promote work discipline (*laodong jilü*) and scrutinize detailed regulations of management and punishment; and pass these implementations on to local workers.

2. Improve safety training (*anquan jiaoyu*) of workers, improve the prevention of theft and measures against robbery and avoid driving without license or after or during consumption of alcohol, which may have a bad influence on the construction work. See the previous notice … on punishments in respect to alcohol consumption.

3. Pay more respect to local customs and habits (*fengsu xiguan*). Do not take liberties with women (*tiaoxi*)[28] or take local women to the compound to spend the night (*liusu dangdi funü*). When this is found out a severe punishment will follow, likely in accordance with local legal practices. If this is the case, the project department will not offer any form of support.

4. Strengthen management in regard to hygiene (*weisheng guanli*) in the compounds, environmental protection, the processing of garbage, aim for digging pits and burying [the garbage] (*wa keng yanmai*), do not discard of garbage outside the compound area. This would lead to unnecessary disputes [with local residents].

5. Discarding earth and creating makeshift roads should strictly fall within the red borders of the requisitioned land. Space outside the designated areas should not be used at will. You will otherwise be held responsible for the consequences.

The regulations above, to reaffirm matters: every crew should check if they do this correctly and carry these out strictly. [Every crew must make sure that] it pays respect to local customs and abides the local law in order to establish a good image (*xingxiang*) of Chinese companies and further successful production and implementation.

The AH-project management department

The points addressed in the letter reflect the most disputed issues between Chinese migrants and the host society. What then made management so concerned with these issues? The above call for law and order was, I argue, more than an attempt to maintain good relations with local authorities and the Tigrayan community. There was more at play, something that

[28] The Chinese concept of *tiaoxi* (as in taking liberties with women) implied a severe offense, which, although not punishable by law, could, for instance, lead to expulsion from the army. In this context the terms means having sexual intercourse with prostitutes. The fact that the word '*tiaoxi*' is used to indicate 'commercial sex' shows the strong moral judgement behind the offense.

the condensed and business-like tenor of the letter conceals. The notice was also an attempt to restore the image (*xingxiang*) of the Chinese. If anything, the notice can be read as a 'civilizing offensive' (Stoler 1997: 201) initiated by management to sanitize the image of Chinese nationals in south-eastern Tigray.

Judging from narratives on and off the construction site, the project management was very much preoccupied with reputation and the protection thereof. The image of the civilised and cultured, hard-working and disciplined Chinese was crucial in retaining the ethnic categories on which (symbolic) authority was based, and which underpinned the relations of production. At risk was the blurring of boundaries between those who had *suzhi* and *wenhua* and those who had not – boundaries between Chinese managers who not only exercised control over the means of production but also believed they possessed exclusive knowledge about, and access to, development, and the managed, Ethiopian workers who sold their crude labour power and were expected to buy into Chinese ideas about development.

The issues addressed – labour control, personal safety, sexual morals, hygiene, spatial control – are precisely the themes that had concerned European travellers and explorers in their encounters with Africans during the nineteenth-century colonial expansion; these were encounters in which discipline and self-control came to play a crucial role (Fabian 2000). Note that the strengthening of management (*jiaqiang guanli*) is seen as the sole solution to all the five issues addressed in the letter. As Fabian argues, self-control implied 'other-control' (ibid.: 7); and other-control ensured an authoritative distance – physical and social – from the other. The kind of fear and frustration discussed in the previous chapter were not only prompted by subversive activities initiated by the other, such as theft and mockery. Such powerful emotions also arose from divisions *within* the migrant community, from what Stoler has termed the 'interior frontiers' (1997: 199), in the context of colonial rule in the Dutch East Indies. Stoler explored the epistemic anxieties of colonial administrators of 'white

impoverishment' (ibid.: 213), the degradation of the white race, and the loss of ethnic superiority, for which the *métissage* – children of mixed descent yet classified as European – were held responsible. The offspring of native women and European men threatened to blur social and political categories of ruler and ruled (see also Stoler 1997). Through 'moral statecraft' (Stoler 2009: 102) aimed at improving education and the upbringing of *métissage*, the colonial regime sought to protect the 'essence' of European identity and thereby to preserve white prestige and supremacy.

Although the historical and socio-political context is fundamentally different, a comparable chasm between the dominant rhetoric of unity and solidarity and an underlying concern with the reality of sharp social divisions characterised the lives of Chinese workers in south-eastern Tigray. Anxieties produced by the interior frontier did not, however, derive from an in-between category of *métissage* in the historical trajectory described by Stoler, but by a category of 'full-blood' Chinese, who were regarded as inferior and impure, based on social categories transported to Africa and supposedly confirmed by actions and interactions with the Ethiopian community. Social stratification within the Chinese migrant community in Tigray, I argue, was based largely on socio-economic divisions originating in Chinese society. However, these divisions were put to test in daily interactions with the host community. The present chapter addresses the tension between, on the one hand, the promotion of a single ethnic identity – a common 'Chineseness' – and, on the other hand, the exclusionary rhetoric that prevailed in informal narratives among migrants.

Certain members of the Chinese community, in particular foremen of private subcontractors such as Qimo and Wuhe (generally, former rural migrants in China), were held to misrepresent, or worse, contaminate the very essence of what it means to be Chinese. Their skin, it was said, was nearly as dark and coarse as the skin of Tigrayan farmers, and the way the foremen talked was at least as rough and rustic (*cucao*). Foremen of private

subcontractors were thought to lack precisely what the Tigrayan farmer lacked: formal education and upbringing in an 'advanced' (that is, urban) environment. 'Our foremen closely resemble local people. They are both peasants', employees of the Chinese contractor frequently remarked. The term 'peasants' referred not only to profession but also to the lack of social etiquette, *suzhi* (quality) and *wenhua* (culture).

Beginning with a sketch of the company hierarchy, I continue with exploring social stratification among Chinese individuals to demonstrate what drove migrants apart. I also look at attempts to create a common Chineseness as well as at the kinds of divisiveness that stood in the way of the goal of unity and solidarity.

3.1 State-owned, private, and 'private private' enterprises

To say that there was one internal frontier is inaccurate, for in fact there were many such frontiers. Internal differentiation occurred on many levels, starting with the type of sector in which Chinese migrants were employed, the company for which they worked, the contract under which they were hired, the nature of their job, and so forth. In particular, Chinese workers from poor rural backgrounds under temporary contract with private construction companies, working on-site all day, every day were, ironically, seen as threats to the image (*xingxiang*) of the civilised and cultured, hard-working and disciplined Chinese. These workers were the main target of the civilising offensive.

That said, it is important to clarify divisions and to differentiate among companies. A broad spectrum of Chinese companies was involved in the road project, from one-man businesses and private companies to a provincial-level SOE, a national-level SOE and the contractor, which I will call RCE. Private and provincial-level state-owned companies had entered Ethiopia under the umbrella of RCE, which had been granted a license by the PRC government to contract for infrastructure projects overseas. Subcontracting companies,

however, remained invisible to Ethiopian authorities. Public activities, such as the purchase of machinery, arrangements for airline tickets, visas and work permits, communications with road authorities and consultant engineers and so forth were dealt with by RCE or under its name. As foreign contractors were contractually prohibited to outsource more than ten per cent of the building work to subcontractors (in reality they often subcontracted over 50 per cent of the contract price), contractors acted as one company, at least in their dealing with the outside world. 'We can easily tell Ethiopian companies apart, but we simply cannot tell the difference between one Chinese and the other', sighed an engineer of the ERA, and no wonder. Management had issued a project-wide ban on the use of the English word 'subcontractor' ('*fenbaoshang*' in Mandarin); any Chinese employee caught saying the word would be fined ETB 1,000. Instead, the use of the word 'sub-crew' ('*fenbu*') was encouraged.

RCE had outsourced the lion's share of the building while retaining construction management and the purchase of building materials (e.g. bitumen, steel, cement).[29] Qimo Construction, a private company from Fujian, was responsible for half of the earthworks, which involved processing and moving soils and rocks to adjust the 15-centimetre-thick sub-base (the layer between the subgrade and the base-course) of the existing gravel road, to make sure it was in line with the new designs, as well as building structural works: bridges, box and pipe culverts, retaining walls, and ditches. The other part of the earthworks and structural works was carried out by Wuhe Construction, a one-man business from a town in Hebei. Duyin Enterprise, a private company from Shandong, was hired to pave the asphalt,

[29] As for the origin of construction materials, water and wooden bars (a tool for setting alignments) were purchased locally. Stone aggregate used for sub-base, base course, wearing course, slope protection, and masonry works was produced in local quarries. Steel bars with varying diameters (from 12 to 32 millimetres) for concrete reinforcement were imported from Turkey. Bitumen came from Iran, petrol from Yemen. Cement was purchased locally from a cement factory in Mekele or, in case supplies ran short, from Addis Ababa. Small building tools (e.g. shovels, chisels, and trowels) were bought in Addis Ababa, Mekele, or towns along the project road. A large proportion of the construction machinery and technical equipment, from level instruments to printers, excavators, asphalt rollers, and their spare parts, typically came from China, although this was not necessarily the case. Whereas Duyin Enterprise had purchased Chinese Xugong asphalt pavers and rollers for this project, when it came to a larger road project in Ghana, the company purchased more expensive German machinery.

and Golden Roads, to produce the asphalt and carry out surface treatment of the base-course layer and the 1.5-metre-wide road verges. Jianghe Construction, a provincial state-owned company from Heilongjiang, joined in later to take over part of the structural works from Qimo Construction in the mountains and to apply the 17.5-centimetre-thick base-course over half the length of the road. The rest of the base-course was placed by Qimo and an Ethiopian company from Addis Ababa. Another private company from Fujian, Lide Construction, took up part of the ditch and culvert work, together with an all-Ethiopian company directed by a Chinese man. Sign posts were made and placed by Duyin Enterprise, which also carried out road line marking at the very end of the project.

In daily life, distinction between Chinese companies on the project was expressed by referring to the quality of what was coined '*daiyu*' ('treatment').[30] Generally, the concept of *daiyu* indicated level of salary, yet it also implied economic and social benefits as well as status of work and living conditions offered by employers. Differences in *daiyu* between companies were mainly reflected in four spheres: level of income of Chinese employees, level of social and contractual security, living arrangements in residential compounds, and food provided by the company to its expatriate staff. Respondents unanimously agreed that in Africa the *daiyu* of Chinese state-owned companies was better than, and preferable to, the *daiyu* of private enterprises. Zhang Fu, employed as site engineer by RCE, explained:

> Today everybody [in China] talks about a stable occupation (*wending zhiye*). You have to make sure you end up working for an SOE (*guoqi*). Only SOEs do not go bankrupt. The Communist Party does not want to lose face. Private enterprises go bankrupt as they please. Moreover, if you work for a private company, the Chinese law does not protect the workers. Private enterprises treat their workers genuinely, in Marx's words, like undisguised exploitation (*chiluoluo de boxue*). (Zhang Fu, 5 June 2012)

Chinese private enterprises operating in Africa had come to represent inferior *daiyu*. When reflecting on Wuhe Construction, a private firm known for its abominable treatment of

[30] The Chinese concept of *daiyu* has many translations, including treatment, salary, status, rank, and so forth.

Chinese staff, site engineer Zhang Zhiyi explained: 'That is really a *private* private enterprise'. 'Private' ('*siyou*') was used as a modifier to suggest everything from overdue salary payments and poor living conditions to no contractual protection whatsoever. Overseas, everyone agreed, you had better make sure you worked for a state-owned company.

The popularity of SOEs over private companies is remarkable, given that many migrants stated they would prefer to work for a private enterprise upon return to China. Private companies were generally thought to have more innovative and flexible management and to offer higher salaries. The popularity of Chinese SOEs as employers overseas, however, reflected the improved image of SOEs in China; in fact, the media have talked about a renewed 'SOE fever' ('*guoqire*') among Chinese college students (Xia 2011: 57). SOEs have managed, partially at least, to restore the 'iron rice bowl' that had been smashed with the enterprise reforms beginning in the 1990s, guaranteeing lifelong employment and welfare benefits. Under the motto 'seize the big [enterprises] and let go of the small' ('*zhua da fang xiao*'), these reforms resulted in mass lay-offs and caused a growing sense of insecurity among citizens employed in the state sector. In the past few years, SOEs have been forced to market themselves in order to attract qualified and favourable personnel, and they have done so relatively successfully. 'When you work for a state-owned enterprise you won't go hungry ('*e bu si*'), but you won't get rich either. You can subsist on your life expenses ('*weichi shenghuo*')', explained Xie Yang, echoing a widespread opinion among migrant workers.

Wuhe and Qimo Construction were reputed to pay the lowest wages, or not pay wages at all. The truck driver of Wuhe, I was told by the asphalt plant crew, had once bought a hand grenade to frighten his boss in order to make him pay his overdue salary. (His method proved successful.) Chinese surveyors, machine operators, and foremen of Qimo Construction received RMB 4,000 to 6,000 per month, hardly more than what they had earned in China in comparable positions. At the end of my fieldwork I met Liu Yongming, who came to

Ethiopia without knowing what his salary would be. At that time Qimo was on the brink of bankruptcy. 'If they would excavate bank notes instead of earth, they would still make [a] loss', smirked an engineer of RCE, reiterating a joke that was going about the project department. Qimo's financial straits were attributed to mismanagement, especially of local employees, and a lack of staff with sound technical knowledge and experience in the road-building sector. Companies like Qimo and Wuhe were pejoratively coined '*nongmin danwei*' ('peasant units'), referring to the majority of staff, who were peasant workers: rural migrants who had left the Chinese countryside to work in the city. The term 'peasant' referred, of course, not only to occupation but also to the possession of *suzhi* and *wenhua* – two concepts used to assign Chinese individuals to social and economic strata in China.

Salaries were not a worry for employees of SOEs, who could expect a salary range of CNY 9,000 to 12,000 (of which up to 70 per cent was received in USD and the remainder in CNY). Even if an SOE were to go bankrupt, Chinese workers argued, it would still pay out salaries to its employees. 'If you watch the news, they are telling that our state banks, such as the Bank of China or the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China, all have dead loans (*sizhang*)', explained Zhang Fu. 'These loans are mostly owed by state-owned enterprises, to give salaries to employees. These companies live from bank loans. If these companies so to say operate badly, they use loans to survive. And the banks give money. It is a bottomless pit'. Of course not all SOEs are loss-making (Huang 2012). Profitable SOEs tend to hoard earnings as bank deposits rather than distribute dividends to shareholders. It is the profit-making SOEs that provide capital for the loss-making SOEs (Morck et al. 2008).

The level of *daiyu* was also apparent from residential compounds, which were often compared and ranked according to the worst living conditions. The Chinese living in Camp 52 of Wuhe – the number indicating the kilometre at which the camp was situated on the project road – and Camp 108 of Qimo were unanimously considered the worst off. Wedged

between rocky mountains on the final section of the road, Camp 108 generated its own electricity with generators that were switched off at nine o'clock in the evening, leaving the camp pitch dark. When they were switched on again in the early mornings (before six o'clock), the generators' warm-up cycle – bright white lights switching on again – functioned as alarm clocks. Entertainment, too, was problematic. While the spacious camps of state-owned companies were provided with entertainment facilities, the only such facility in Camp 108 was a table tennis table, divided in two: one part served as an office desk, the other as a meeting table in the manager's bedroom. Camp 52 had no entertainment facilities whatsoever. Subcontractors' camps, such as 52 and 108, were workers' camps. Black air belched from roaring engines in the mornings, leaving a penetrating trail of exhaust fumes. The sand in the courtyards was stained with oil and petrol. In stark contrast, the project department of RCE was a management camp and therefore quiet and clean. Mobility, too, was at issue. Whereas managers of the contractor had personal pick-ups or four-wheel drives at their disposal, the foremen of Camp 108 often had to take what they called wryly, 'the number 11 bus'. In other words, they had to go on foot.

The compound of RCE, referred to as *xiangmu bu* (project department), was located next to the consultant camp at kilometre 48, circa 500 metres from Mehoni Town, situated between sorghum and teff fields that looked out over what a Chinese mechanic called 'the continuous up and down ('*lianmian qifu*') of mountains tops' to the west. This camp was in fact an oasis. The water spilled by residents had nourished the sorghum in the adjacent fields, which grew tall and green, unlike the sorghum in far-off fields, which was short and yellow. A large part of the harvest failed in the autumn of 2012, due to sparse summer rains. The contractor and consultant camps both got their electricity from Mehoni and were connected to the town by a water pipe that did not provide water. This was not a problem, though, since RCE simply ferried water by trucks from the electric water pump in Gujera, a one-way

distance of eleven kilometres. The camp of RCE, home to 22 Chinese men (as of December 2011), the management for design and construction of the project, was the Chinese camp with the best facilities, including a satellite dish, a basketball and badminton court, a conference room that doubled as a table tennis venue in the evenings, a guest flat, and well-equipped offices. Upon arriving at this camp in early 2008, the Chinese had planted eucalyptus and papaya trees to shade the bedrooms and offices. Chinese workers shared rooms with one other colleague and used communal shower facilities. The project manager enjoyed his own bathroom and television.

Differences in *daiyu* between Chinese firms were also apparent in mundane matters, such as food. The contractor spent USD 15 per person per day on food, which was ample in Ethiopia despite high transportation costs. By contrast, the asphalt plant crew received ETB 2,000 a month for each employee, an amount equal to around USD 3.7 per person per day. (This amount was still high by comparison with other private companies, whose employees lived even more frugally.) With USD 15 per person per day, SOEs imported crab, various sorts of fish and shell-fish from Djibouti, as well as vegetables, such as cauliflower and broccoli (in addition to locally available onion, tomato and cabbage), and fruit, including pineapples, oranges, and mandarins from Addis Ababa. A great variety of mushrooms, tree fungus, seasonings, and sauces from China were also imported, all items that the majority of local Ethiopians had never seen before, let alone consumed. Chinese private companies, such as Golden Roads and Qimo, usually only ate what was available locally. Rice consumed in the contractor's camp came from China. Local rice eaten in private subcontracting camps was dry and less sticky, the private companies' employees complained. Not surprisingly, food was a topic of discussion among those who felt they lacked particular food stuffs, such as meat. The 'private private' company on the project, Wuhe Construction, was said to just have flat round cake (*yuanbing*) for dinner, without any side dishes. This company seldom served

meat. Rumour had it that one day the boss of Wuhe hit nine cows in a traffic accident, three of which died. As Ethiopians do not eat meat from dead animals, the managing director had offered to purchase the cows from the owner, a nearby farmer. However, only one cow would fit into the fridge. The other two carcasses were stored in the kitchen next to the fridge, where after a few days they began to rot.

From the very beginning of my fieldwork, employees of RCE discouraged me from visiting Camp 52 of Wuhe Construction. I respected their advice. The image I gathered of the camp and the company through rumours and gossip was telling enough, especially in regard to employment conditions as well as rankings and relations between companies on the project. Now and then Wuhe's managing director, Lao Zhao, would drive past me, his hands, swathed in black leather gloves, resting on the steering wheel, his eyes fixed on the horizon. Invariably, he ignored me as I tried to greet or approach him. 'He is scared of you. He is afraid that you will bring his bad practices to light'. Fang Lei described Lao Zhao as a 'capitalist of the first hour'.

> You had them in Europe in the early times. You still find them in novels, Russian novels. His methods are merciless (*canren*), and he is never satisfied. He seeks profit unscrupulously (*buzeshouduan*). Money. He does not want to lose money at all costs. If he opens his eyes, the only thing he thinks of is money. At night, when he dreams, he dreams of money.… This person, he is very successful in China. [This type of person] is able to use connections (*guanxi*) to make other connections through money, in order to make even more profit. (Fang Lei, 6 June 2012)

Zhang Zhiyi whispered that Wuhe's manager must be part of the criminal underworld (*hei shehui*) in China. Most of Zhao's employees, in particular the foremen on-site, came from the same town in Hebei province, resulting a tight network of *guanxi* bound together by debt and mutual obligations. Depictions of Lao Zhao as a capitalist of the first hour, or an element of the underworld, illustrate the derogatory attitude of RCE's staff members towards Wuhe and its employees – an attitude that derived from present labour practices in Ethiopia, but, more importantly, from Wuhe's background as a 'peasant unit'.

The association with a thuggish past persisted in gossip, for instance, that Lao Zhao and his foremen also beat local workers. And, 'if the boss suppresses his Chinese employees, these people will use the same methods to suppress their local workers. They copy. They will be of one mind (*yi tiao xin*)'.

> If you go to the building site of [Lao Zhao], what happens a lot is that [Chinese] foremen beat black people. Of course in this country, if you beat someone the consequences will be severe, especially when the local authorities get involved. But do you know why they have this habit of beating? Because in China these people who beat locals are bosses (*laoban*). They have a lot of money. Whatever the cause, they will just beat you.
>
> On the Serdo project (Affar regional state) there was a company similar to this [Wuhe] company, a small construction firm. The boss of that company was a specialist in beating Chinese. After recruiting Chinese staff members from China, he started beating them. The Chinese who got beaten did not dare to demand their salaries as they returned home. They did not know what to do. There was nobody who could sue him and win (*gaoying ta*). His beating was cruel. The Chinese he beat were about twenty. He took every opportunity to beat (*yichayicha da*). (Fang Lei, 6 June 2012)

The association of money (the possession of a lot of money, especially) with exploitation and physical violence does pose troubling questions about private construction enterprises like Lao Zhao's or the company from Shaanxi on the Serdo project. That said, the condemnation of pure capitalist (or 'private private') companies was also a way for staff members of RCE to distance themselves from what were considered lower segments of the Chinese community as well as the poor image this group was ostensibly creating. Physical violence had become the ultimate symbol of a lack of discipline and self-control, which proved to be of great importance in retaining professional distance and a certain social aloofness from the other. The project manager grimaced when describing the punishment methods used by Wuhe's managing director: 'The first time they [his employees] will not get any food. The second time they will not get any sleep either. The third time they will get beaten'. Why did the project manager refrain from taking actions against such malpractice? The reason, one engineer explained, was the dearth of alternatives – few other companies could take over the work. 'In China there are enough building crews (*wudui*) lined up. If one performs badly, the

next one in line can take over the next day. This is not the case in Ethiopia', explained Zhang Zhiyi. There were only a limited number of Chinese construction companies in Ethiopia; to invite over a new company was too costly and time-consuming.

It was the Ethiopian workers who actually managed to keep Lao Zhao in check. Aware of their boss' anxiety about local legal institutions, they levied threats against him that they would take their case to court, thereby forcing the general manager to accommodate their demands. As a result, employment conditions of Ethiopian labourers were, relatively speaking, better than those of their Chinese foremen, who lacked a (legal) channel by which to claim their rights. (In Africa Lao Zhao could escape the watchful eye of Chinese authorities.) Even so, the image of Chinese foremen beating Ethiopian workers was as much a myth as it was a daily reality – none of the employees of RCE had actually seen Wuhe's foremen assaulting Ethiopian workers. Gossip, then, also reflected division within the Chinese community. Middle-level managers looked down on on-site foremen, who were, as managers put it, much like local Ethiopians: unapt to act or speak with 'reason'. Use of physicality to discipline workers and a lack of self-control distinguished the Chinese who spent whole days on-site with local workers from the contractor's educated staff and company management. The latter tried to dissociate themselves from what they saw as inferior segments of the Chinese community. Foremen on-site, on the other hand, did not seem to pay heed to their superiors' concerns; warnings and admonitions were generally met with shrugs. Most foremen did not understand or care about the preoccupations of higher-level managers, who were, albeit higher-educated, mostly younger and less experienced, both in work and life.

3.2 Company veterans, university graduates, and peasant workers

Social divisions persisted not only between but also within companies. From informal conversations with migrants who had come to Ethiopia in the late 1990s, I gathered that the social composition of the Chinese road-building community in Ethiopia had changed over the years. The first Chinese SOE to enter the Ethiopian construction market as a competitive contractor still employed a handful of veterans. Hu Chunfu, a 58-year-old mechanic, was a case in point. Hu had come to Ethiopia with one of the first rounds of Chinese road builders in 1998, after having accumulated twenty years of work experience in the road-building sector in China. Hu was assigned a post in his present company when he returned to Beijing in 1977, after being sent down to the countryside in Heilongjiang where he worked on a large state farm during the Cultural Revolution. In 1997 he was asked to go on what he liked to call a 'mission' ('*renwu*') to Ethiopia, leaving his wife and grown-up son and family back in Beijing. When I first met him, Hu expressed ambivalence about returning to China, a country that in his words had gone 'frantic' ('*fengkuang*'). 'I don't recognize anything anymore every time I go back home. Here [in Ethiopia] life is simple ('*jiandan*'). When I got the chance to return to China after the completion of phase two of the ring road [in 2004], I decided to stay [in Ethiopia]'.[31]

The *suzhi* of new arrivals was also a sore spot; lamentably, it fell below that of the first Chinese migrants, Liang Jun, a 52-year-old site manager, explained. He too had migrated to Ethiopia in 1998.

> The first Chinese who came here had a high *suzhi*. Most of them were graduates from Qinghua[32] [university] and other good universities. Now my company employs peasant workers (*nongmingong*) as supervisors. They don't belong to our company (*danwei*). Our first group was of a high level (*gaoji*)…. The assistant manager of the AA-project [Addis-Adama expressway project], for instance, he was part of our first batch. Nowadays graduates from Qinghua do not want to come to Africa anymore. (Liang Jun, 31 October 2011)

[31] At the end of my field research I learned that Hu Chunfu had retired and returned to China.
[32] Qinghua University is a top university in China (Beijing) specialising in engineering. Only Peking University is higher in the national charts that rank China's foremost universities.

Scholars have tracked this attitude elsewhere. Yan and Sautman (2010) noticed similar views among Chinese migrants with government-run agriculture projects in Zambia, who complained about the *suzhi* of newcomers employed by private enterprise. The authors assert that, in the era of agro-socialism until the late 1980s, agricultural experts received training in social etiquette and intercultural communication, and their relationships with local African communities were more harmonious. In both the Ethiopian and Zambian cases, *suzhi*, as a measure of distinction between the established and the newcomers, was not so much linked to neo-liberalist principles as it was to socialist values of non-materialism, equality and submission to the common good. Accusations that Wuhe Construction was a 'private private' enterprise and its management exploitative also confirmed the prevalence of moral attitudes associated with socialism, which functioned as a framework for judgements about the other *within* the Chinese community. The discourse on *suzhi* also illustrates how widely applicable a concept it actually was, ranging from intangible moral values and social etiquette to levels of formal education.

Even high *suzhi*, though, was no guarantee against insecurity among the permanent employees of SOEs, such as Liang Jun, who saw their privileged status threatened by temporary peasant workers (*nongmingong*). Liang felt the need to distinguish himself and his status as a 'real' or 'full' staff member. In his opinion, peasant workers lacked this entitlement. Liang's view was endorsed by electrical engineer Li Lianpo, Liang's colleague and the only Qinghua graduate left in the Ethiopian branch of their company. 'The two brothers from Hebei; you do know that they are peasant workers, don't you?' Li asked me one day, pronouncing the word '*nongmingong*' with a slight air of discontent. It was the older generation, especially (those in their forties or fifties), who were quick to point out the differences between temporary project-based staff, the peasant workers, and permanent

employees of the company, whom they referred to as 'the people of our work unit' ('*women danwei de ren*'). Peasant workers, also called 'people recruited from outside' ('*waizhao de ren*'), were not seen as part of the work unit, despite the fact that they sometimes worked up to seven, eight years for the company. Their employment contracts were linked to single projects or overseas branches only. This distinction in employment status (as in *danwei de ren* versus *waizhao de ren*) mirrored the persistent rural-urban divide in China. The older generation of workers in SOEs often hailed from urban areas, whereas peasant workers came from rural backgrounds. In the first Chinese SOE in Ethiopia, this division was internal to the company; on the project in Tigray the division played out *between* companies.

The number of peasant workers hired by SOEs was small. Most worked for private subcontractors to manage the work on the building site. Both groups were, however, conscious of the divide. Several foremen excused themselves with 'but I do not have *wenhua*' when I tried to ask them questions, implying that I could better address my queries to someone else (with culture). 'I can't write, really. I finished only fourth grade. I come from the countryside'. In contrast, Li Lianpo had an urban background, having grown up in the Muslim quarter of Beijing. As an electrical engineering student at Qinghua University, he had participated in the Tiananmen protests in 1989 and was assigned a low-end job in a textile factory after graduation. In the mid-1990s Li started working as electrician and specialised in elevator repair. Before moving to Ethiopia, Li earned CNY 3,000 per month. As the main person responsible for installing street-lighting on his company's projects in Addis Ababa, he now earned CNY 11,000. A higher salary enabled him to pay off the mortgage on a flat he had bought in 2005 for CNY 300,000 in the fifth ring of Beijing, where his wife, four grandparents, and ten-year-old daughter lived. A tiny photograph of his wife and daughter taken in Beihai Park hung on his key fob.

‘When I came to Beijing, the third ring had just been completed’, recalled Liu Binhong. ‘The third ring was already a hundred kilometres long. Now the sixth ring has already been built. My country develops so fast’. ‘It is hard to adapt (*shiying bu liao*) to all these changes’, contemplated Liu Kangping, who had spent five years in Ethiopia and managed to convince his brother to join him. He had recommended Liu Binhong to his employer. The ‘two brothers from Hebei’ were not sons of the same parents; they came from the same lineage in a county in rural Hebei. The ‘brothers’ were first-generation rural migrants who had left their home village for Beijing in the mid-1990s. Liu Kangping had remodelled flats of high-rise housing estates in Beijing for ten years before starting a small business in construction materials in Beijing’s Fengtai district. In China he made around 5,000 CNY per month. In Ethiopia he earned CNY 8,000 (completely in CNY), he told me, admitting that the higher salary was his sole motivation for migrating to Ethiopia, although when I spoke with him again, towards the end of my field research, he raised doubts about whether CNY 3,000 was really worth the separation from his family. The younger Liu Binhong had held a thousand-and-one posts in Beijing, from kitchen assistant to construction worker, from clerk to taxi driver.

The internal division between permanent employees and peasant workers in the company in Addis Ababa was patently visible in spatial practices as well. In the Ring Road Project’s compound, two tables were arranged in the canteen. One was occupied by permanent employees (most of whom had worked with the company in China); the other was used by peasant workers and young permanent staff, who had started working for the company in Ethiopia. Significant distance between the tables meant that conversations were limited to those seated together. The daily food consumed by both parties was the same, but the permanent employees smoked each other’s cigarettes and shared fruit and melon seeds with one another.

In this context distinction in regard to *suzhi* (and *wenhua*) was not only based on rural-urban duality but also on generation and employment type. On the one hand, the province of origin was of less importance abroad. Apart from national-level SOEs such as Liang and Li's company, smaller state-owned and private companies were place-based, and so both higher- and lower-level managers came from the same province and sometimes the same region within the province. That said, *suzhi* was intrinsically linked to a rural or urban origin. Mobility, that is migration to Ethiopia, did not help migrants to 'shed rurality and gain *suzhi*' (Sun 2009: 638). Rural-urban divisions were transported abroad.

It was to the non-Chinese that the community appeared homogenous and unaltered. Ermias Ezekiel, who had worked for the Chinese since 1998, first as construction blasting manager, now as management assistant – Ermias was the only Ethiopian employee granted the authority to sign documents for his company – uttered that Chinese migrants had not changed at all. 'They looked the same as nowadays', he said as I interviewed him in the stylish reception room of his company's head office. 'They sit on one spot and simply stay there; in a squatting position, with their straw hat and a glass of water with tea leaves in their hand'. 'The only thing that has changed', remarked the Italian resident engineer of the Ring Road Project who had supervised Chinese contractors for many years, 'is their level of English. The English of each new project manager is higher than that of the previous one'.

The Italian engineer's remark suggests a telling difference between older and newer migrants. The generation of Chinese that had migrated to Ethiopia in the late 1990s and decided to stay was shrinking. This group was being replaced by fresh graduates who were commonly recruited at job fairs organised by universities throughout China, a recruitment method termed 'campus recruitment' ('*xiaoyuan zhaopin*'). Recruitment at educational institutions occurs after recruitment via job sites on the Internet – often referred to as 'recruitment from society' ('*shehui zhaopin*') – as the most widespread method by which

young graduates find employment (Lu 2011). For Chinese SOEs, as well as for larger private companies, campus recruitment was a cheap and effective method for recruiting a large number of employees who fit a certain profile, in a relatively short amount of time. Students were recruited while still in school and could expect to commence their job right after graduation.

Ren Ning spent 20 of the 33 days between his graduation and departure for Ethiopia on job training in Beijing. He signed his two contracts – one five-year contract for the mother company and one 1.5-year contract for the overseas branch – two days before flying to Addis Ababa on 1 August 2007. (He had already signed a preliminary contract back on campus.) Occasionally, especially after the launch of a new project, there was even less time between leaving school and starting work, such as in the summer of 2010, when Pan Hongfei had just one week to prepare for his travels to Ethiopia after his graduation ceremony on 30 June. On 6 July he flew to Addis Ababa, where he spent a few days before being sent to his branch in Tigray. There was insufficient time for any job training; migrants commenced their activities directly upon arrival. As such, this form of migration bears similarities to labour transplantation (Xiang 2012), in which migrants are extracted from their hometown – in this case, the campus – and transplanted to a foreign workplace. The journey of the migrant is carefully planned by the recruiter, the sole care-taker, including the return upon completion of the employment contract. However, labour transplantation often involves recruitment agencies who place workers with foreign employers. In this case, the employer is native and recruitment is direct. Yet the speed by which migration is organised and in which the actual journey takes place, as well as the tightness with which it is controlled, is comparable.

Curiously, Chinese companies did not try to recruit the brightest students from the highest ranking universities for their projects in Africa, but rather aimed for students from

second- and third-tier universities. Pan Hongfei explained why his present company had come to his university in Chongqing.

> In regard to engineering subjects, our university is not bad. Of course, it is not comparable with China's front-ranking universities, such as Qinghua, Beijing University, or even Xi'an Jiaotong University or Shanghai Jiaotong University, including Xinan Jiaotong University in Chengdu. These [universities] are the best. Occasionally my company will recruit from these universities. We have some [staff members from those universities]. But as we often have to go [and work] outside (*zai waimian pao*), students from these universities do not wish to work for these kind of companies longer than one or two years…. The conditions here are relatively bitter, but the treatment is relatively good.… Students like us cannot enter design companies. Students from top universities will work for one or, at most, two years and leave. They [the company] hope we will stay for a relatively long time. (Pan Hongfei, 25 May 2012)

Students from higher-ranking universities would rather go to Europe or the United States than 'bear hardships in Africa' ('*zai feizhou chiku*'), I was told repeatedly. 'To go (or: run around) outside' ('*zai waimian pao*') implied both being away from home and working in the open air. Associated with physical strain and fatigue, work on the building site ranked lower than design work in the office. Chinese workers in Ethiopia often joked about age and teased colleagues that they looked older than they actually were. The evildoer here was the African sun, which was thought to make one old too quickly. Dark, wrinkled skin was the main sign of deterioration from outdoor labour. Office work was considered only mentally straining, and was reserved for the more gifted students. Since SOEs in Africa wanted to avoid the risk of investing in new employees who would only stay for one or two years, the 'village student'('*nongcun daxuesheng*') (He 2011: 104; Xia 2011: 57) from a second- or third-tier university was a perfect fit for the desired profile.

Li Maocai, a 27-year-old draftsman of RCE, demonstrated how the job interview for his first company, the overseas branch of a provincial-level SOE, had gone.

> The interview was very simple. 'May I ask where are you from?' [the interviewer asked] 'Hmm, from the village.' He will ask this because peasant children can bear hardships (*chiku*). 'Okay 'What about your school results?' 'I see, they are alright.' Then he does not need a single moment to notice that my skin is dark. Exposure to the sun won't be a problem. 'How many siblings do you have?' Normally, if there are two children, the parents will not curb one of them to go abroad. Anyhow, they will not try to keep them at home against all odds. 'Well look, that's perfect. You can come and join [our company]'. (Li Maocai, 19 May 2012)

Li's illustration might be slightly exaggerated, but it shows how SOEs respond to certain stereotypes, especially regarding the rural background of applicants. A dark skin was associated with country life, and life on the land produced bodies that knew how to bear hardships. The ability to 'eat bitterness' ('*chiku*') was one of the main requirements for a job in Africa, where both working and living environment were considered rough and tough. Only those with a thick skin were expected to endure life in Africa for a substantial duration. Apart from Li, seven other members of the project department's 22 lead staffers in Mehoni had entered the company through campus recruitment, at universities in Xi'an (two), Chongqing, Wuhan, Jinan, Qingdao, Tangshan – provincial capitals or major cities. Two staff had been recruited on campus by their previous employer. New graduates had just obtained bachelor degrees. It was the arrival of the first recruit with a master's degree in 2012 that became a topic of heated debate, as a master's student was expected to find a decent job in China, not have to go to Africa.

Coming from rural backgrounds themselves, the younger generation seemed to care less about the division between permanent staff members and peasant workers. This generation was rather more conscious of a generational divide and occasionally complained about the bad manners of older colleagues: company veterans and peasant workers alike. Li Yang, who was 27 years old and worked in the financial department of a branch of an SOE in Addis Ababa, admitted that she was sometimes embarrassed by the older generation of Chinese migrants. She described them as rough and rustic (*cucao*), in particular when they raised their voice to Ethiopians. Both the disapproval by higher-level managers of lower-level foremen, and the complaints of young engineers about their older colleagues, indicated a sensitivity about self-image vis-à-vis the host society as well as an attempt to protect reputation. Trying to keep up a good image of diligence, discipline, and professionalism,

members of the Chinese community attempted to dissociate from what they saw as inferior segments of the group.

3.3 Promoting Chineseness

The exclusionary rhetoric described above stood in sharp relief to the promotion of solidarity by the same higher-level managers. In order to maintain and secure ethnic boundaries, the promotion of a single ethnic identity was crucial. Despite their fierce criticism of foremen on-site, higher-level managers (and the project manager in particular) saw it as their responsibility to remind inferiors about their origin, common ground, and identity. As a result, internal differentiation was in constant tension with a discourse of solidarity, in which kinship terminology (*gege*, elder brothers) or concepts that stressed geographical proximity – 'all Chinese here are fellow villagers' ('*tongxiangren*') – were used to evoke a sense of familiarity and comradeship. Solidarity was not only functional in distinguishing oneself from the other but also in creating a sense of belonging. Depending on the context, Chinese identified themselves as a single tight-knit community, ascribing to themselves distinct, commonly held traits that were of higher value than the other (Barth 1998 [1969]; Elias and Scotson 1994 [1965]). Sentiments about solidarity and familiarity were based on practices and customs shared only by expatriates. These practices had to be maintained or revived constantly in order to be effective, and often confirmed or re-established bonds with the fatherland and the family. Here, I explore three (of many) forms in which what I call 'Chineseness' was expressed in daily life: in living arrangements, forms of conviviality, and gift-giving. In the next chapter I will discuss the ethnic character traits that Chinese managers ascribed to themselves and their Ethiopian workers, as a way of distinguishing between themselves and the other.

Chinese *feidi* (Lee 2009) were places flown over from China and transplanted overseas; as such, they were the very expression, if not celebration, of Chineseness. This was especially visible in the material sense, based on what Barth has called the 'tangible assets' of ethnic identity (Barth 1998 [1969]: 25), which in Camp 48 of RCE included: the red lanterns at the entrance to the compound; the sun-faded Spring Festival couplets and paper decorations on doors; the prefabricated housing that one finds on building sites throughout China; the lazy Susans, sterilizing cabinets, and Chinese tableware in the dining room; the Chinese-style black leather furniture; rectangular mosquito nets and colourful polyester bed linen in the bedrooms; even the printers and computers in the offices. The more financial resources a company had, the more material items could be flown or shipped from China. In fact, the degree to which employers did so became a measure of distinction between Chinese companies. In the case of the road-building project, it was the contractor's staff who lived the most 'Chinese' of all – consuming rice imported from China, brushing teeth with Chinese toothpaste, washing clothes with Chinese detergent, and hanging them to dry on clothes hangers shipped over from China. By contrast, Chinese workers of Golden Roads consumed Ethiopian rice purchased in Mekele, used toothpaste and detergent bought in Mehoni, and threw their wet clothes outside, over a locally purchased laundry line. Moreover, employees of the contractor ate Chinese foodstuffs that their counterparts in private companies did not have access to, including lotus root, soy sauces, golden needle mushrooms, and different types of tofu.

Chineseness was also created by immaterial things, such as music. In Camp 48 Chinese employees were summoned to the dining hall by '*Nufang de shengming*' ('Life in full bloom') and '*Tiantang nühai*' ('Girl of heaven'), the favourite pop songs of the project manager, which blared from the loudspeakers at breakfast time (half past six), when the consultant engineers were still fast asleep, then again at lunch (twelve o'clock) and dinner

time (half past six in the evening). *Feidi* aroused a feeling of familiarity, and alternatively, a sense of alienation from local surroundings. Reminiscent of the traditional, self-contained *danwei* (work unit) in China, *feidi*, by virtue of their closed and intimate nature, bound employees together and facilitated a sense of conviviality. Sharing food, especially, signified proximity and a shared lifestyle (cf. Abu-Lughod 1986: 63), and so was an important component of conviviality. Fabian points out that conviviality fuelled by a good meal 'heightened [a] sense of belonging, the relaxing of everyday controls, a freer exchange of insights and opinions (and occasionally, blows)' among European travellers and colonial agents in Africa (2000: 73). The same was true for Chinese migrants in Tigray. Festive meals and collective activities, such as karaoke and sports games, were a means of producing Chineseness, as well as staging Chineseness to the other.

A sense of occasion played an important part as well. In spite of repeated complaints about Ethiopian religious holidays, Chinese were keen to celebrate their own national holidays, mostly with a festive meal, including October First National Holiday (*guoqingjie*), Mid-Autumn Festival (*zhongqiujie*), Lantern Festival (*yuanxiaojie*), Tomb Sweeping Day (*qingmingjie*), International Labour Day (*laodongjie*) and, most importantly, Chinese Spring Festival (*chunjie*). During the 2012 Chinese New Year the contractor staff organised a banquet for the Ethiopian consultant engineers, serving both Chinese and Ethiopian food. The Chinese would be drinking, singing, and laughing, while the Ethiopian consultant staff sat quietly around two lazy Susans in a corner of the dining hall. The Chinese staff tried to engage the Ethiopians in the celebrations by making them participate in a quiz and a balloon game, and these activities coaxed some smiles, but overall the consultant engineers remained rather uncomfortable in the Chinese environment. The rest of the evening was filled with fireworks (although town authorities had requested that the Chinese not set off too many fireworks and that they stay inside the compound so as not to upset or frighten local

residents). This was just one occasion on which Chineseness was on full display. What the Ethiopians thought of this display is hard to say. Regardless, for the migrants, the celebration of Chinese national holidays reinforced bonds not only with compatriots abroad but also with relatives at home – albeit that depended on the means of communication and how accessible it was. The Ethiopian telephone network, which had been set up and run by the Chinese private enterprise Zhongxing, was down for two days during the 12 Chinese Spring Festival. In an attempt to reach their kin, an engineer of RCE drove more than a hundred kilometres southward, in the direction of Weldiya, while his colleague drove north toward Mekele – both to no avail. In any case, the simultaneity of festive events nonetheless confirmed bonds with family members back home.

Chineseness, especially in its material form, was also maintained by a lively gift exchange between countries, companies, camps, and individuals. Gift giving was a means of cultivating *guanxi* (social relations), and was thus a crucial part of life on and off the building site. In addition, gifts triggered memories and feelings of companionship. Indeed, the exchange of objects (often Chinese or China-related objects) not only maintained relations between equals but also smoothed out work relations with superiors or inferiors. Gift giving thus cut across social and occupational strata. Commodities and immaterial things, such as music, accompanied migrants across borders and connected them to home (Chu 2010). Chinese staff members who returned home for the annual holidays were also expected to bring back a plethora of gifts – requested or unrequested – for fellow team-members and friends. Depending on the value of items and the status of the receiver, money was given in return, although this was primarily the case among equals. During the period that their colleagues were away, crew members talked excitedly about whatever items they had ordered and would soon be able to consume upon their colleagues' return to camp. Prior to the departure of crew members, the team discussed among themselves which items they would

request the others to bring back from China. Often an extra suitcase was required to carry all such gifts.

Du Tianfu came back from China with an entire suitcase reserved just for gifts for his asphalt plant colleagues: four pieces of smoked ham (*huotui*), two packs of dried fish; 500 grams of shrimp sheets (*xiapian*) to soak in water; three packages of tea leaves, four packs of moon cake, five kilos of sesame seeds, cumin and other seasoning; four pieces of soap; two packs of panty liners for Gu Diemeng; ten boxes of medicine (*yunnan baiyao*) and herbal plasters (*gaoyao*); a leather belt for a generator; seeds for beans, tomatoes, aubergines, and crown daisies; eight cartons of Chinese cigarettes; and a new laptop for a colleague working in Debre Zeit. Bai Fu, who returned at the same time, had brought a few T-shirts and trousers for Wang Taihe and Li Hongde along with other food items. It was also common practice to bring fruit from China that was not available in Ethiopia, such as pears or pomegranates. Cigarettes, however, were by far the most popular item to exchange. The fate of such coveted items, however, could not always be safeguarded, regardless of the noble intentions of the workers. On their trip to China, Dai Tianhan and Du Tianfu had taken four boxes of cactus fruit for Lian Du, the former cook, and the partners of Li Hongde and Wang Taihe, along with three packs of instant coffee, one pack of tea, and a jar of honey – all confiscated by customs at Beijing International Airport. Gifts not only strengthened ties between migrants but also between migrants and their homeland. In this way, the transportation of commodities by individual migrants served not only to maintain but also to reproduce Chineseness abroad (cf. Chu 2010 on the transportation of 'Americanness').

Guanxi exchange also took place at the company level. 'You should go to China and work with a company there for six months', Chen Delin, manager of Duyin Enterprise, told me. 'If we would be in China, Golden Roads and my company would be competitors. Here we support each other'. Companies usually exchanged food stuffs: carp from lake Hashenge,

camel legs and pork, cucumber, celery, coriander, and garlic chives (*jiucai*) from the vegetable garden, white spirits, and other types of liquor – all with the idea that the whole team could enjoy these gifts at lunch or dinner. But *guanxi* were also selective. Golden Roads, for instance, maintained close ties with Jianghe Construction, another company from north-east China, whereas Golden Roads had almost no contact or exchange of this sort with Qimo Construction from Fujian, whose crew members were nicknamed the 'bickering ('*jijiao*') women' (one of the North-South Chinese stereotypes). In Ethiopia, too, maintaining ties to Chinese native places created either solidarity or deepened the divisions that held back home.

Again, a sense of occasion often came into play. The physical demands of the project meant that RCE staff often stayed for lunch at subcontractors' camps, and in return for lunch, they would offer vegetables, such as peppers and carrots, or seasoning taken (secretly) from their kitchen at Camp 48. And they bought beer. A lunch could also be exchanged for building materials or favours of a more intangible nature. RCE had, for instance, a loader and an excavator stationed in Adiqey to help out small subcontractors who did not have their own machinery. In theory these companies had to pay for borrowing the machines; in practice, the return of material or immaterial favours sufficed. I asked Wang Li, the Chinese manager of the all-Ethiopian subcontractor, how he had arranged for the loader that was dumping sand for his cement mix next to a box culvert under construction. He grinned: 'For a lunch at mine [sic] tomorrow'. He was planning to prepare spicy roast chicken, his specialty, and the favourite dish of his guests of the contractor. *Guanxi* exchange between companies and individuals created all sorts of relations, including relations of dependence, reliance, debt, trust, and friendship. Regardless of whether these relations were negative or positive, they all served to promote or facilitate interaction.

The Chinese proverb, 'as soon as a person has left, the tea gets cold' ('*renzouchaliang*'), highlights the maintenance of *guanxi*. The ability to keep Chineseness

alive and to reproduce it both materially (through the exchange of objects) and immaterially (through fostering camaraderie) translated into the capacity of workers to remind themselves of home and everything associated with it, and to maintain strong ties with their common background.

3.4 The protection of internal frontiers

> The idea of society is a powerful image. It is potent in its own right to control or to stir men to action. This image has form; it has external boundaries, margins, internal structure. Its outlines contain power to reward conformity and repulse attack. There is energy in its margins and unstructured areas. For symbols of society, any human experience of structures, margins or boundaries is ready to hand. (Douglas 2002 [1966]: 141)

Constructing an image of civilised, disciplined, hard-working Chinese was crucial in maintaining the ethnic categories upon which symbolic authority on the road crews as well as divisions of labour were predicated. These categories came to demarcate the external boundaries of the ethnic group and so, too, the boundaries between the managers and the managed, the experts and the uninitiated, the knowledgeable and the ignorant. As the preservation of Chineseness and the protection of a certain Chinese essence from pollution rested on retaining relative independence or distance from the other, Chinese managers of a higher class came to perceive dependence on the host society as neediness and social poverty (cf. Stoler 1989: 151). On certain occasions Chinese foremen of a lower class provoked considerable embarrassment on the part of project management by muddling ethnic and social categories; as a result, the foremen were regarded as a threat to the socio-political order within the migrant community as well as in relation to the other. Two arenas, in particular, were problematic in relation to contaminating the proper image of the Chinese: in food practices and romantic relations – precisely those practices that lend social groups like the Chinese in south-eastern Tigray their ethnic identity.

Dissatisfied with the largely meatless meals offered by their company, foremen of Qimo's Camp 108 regularly visited farmsteads at lunch time to have chicken prepared by Tigrayan women. The lack of meat, especially pork, but also chicken and beef, accounted for dissatisfaction with work and life in general; in fact, meat, and the lack thereof, became *pars pro toto* for all other forms of discontent about life in Africa and company *daiyu*. Enjoying meat at local farmsteads was, therefore, more than a way to simply satisfy nutritional needs. It was also a form of defiance against enterprise management. When Qimo's assistant manager caught the foremen in the act, as he did once when he caught the men eating chicken soup in the home of a local worker, he summoned the workers back to work, full of ire. Qimo's assistant manager, who referred to his workers as '*laji*' ('garbage') when explaining that he faced difficulties managing his expatriate staff, lamented: 'My employees are peasants. They don't have knowledge about culture ('*wenhua zhisi*'). They are like our local workers: peasant workers ('*nongmingong*'). They shout at workers. They don't have *suzhi*. I try to educate them on manners, but mostly to no avail'. Whereas food imported from China and prepared in Chinese fashion was perceived as pure and clean, food from Ethiopia prepared in a local manner was seen as impure – much as how Ethiopian food was consumed, with the hands, was regarded. Chinese foremen who shared food prepared by local people with local people, were thus risking physical and social pollution. Sharing food like this also symbolised the proximity of sharers, and thus threatened to annul the physical and social distance between Chinese and Ethiopians. Such sharing also signified the failure of the Chinese to contain their wants and needs, a move which, in turn, negated both self- and other-control. It was this all-sacred distance, then, that higher-level Chinese managers sought to protect at all costs.

The issue of *tiaoxi* (taking liberties with women), also addressed in the letter at the introduction to this chapter, was, however, the more pressing issue. It was a sensitive topic,

although not taboo in conversation. In fact, 'to look for local women' ('*zhao dangdi nüde*'), as *tiaoxi* was referred to colloquially – the Chinese words for prostitute (*jinü*) and visiting prostitutes (*piaochang*) were seldom brought up – was a popular topic of informal talk on and off the building site. Gossip about sex with Ethiopian prostitutes, rendezvous with local women, casual flirtations, intermarriages, and mixed-blood children abounded. Rumour had it that an increasing number of Ethiopian children with Asian eyes, referred to as '*China babies*' by Ethiopians, had been spotted along the road. The umbrella category of *China babies* encompassed not only children of mixed descent but also light-skinned children who were abandoned by their Ethiopian fathers. Sexuality was thus a politically charged issue, as it conflated with ethnic categories and national identity, both.

As Douglas has noted, sexuality is important in preserving the purity of social groups (2002 [1966]: 155). Much like the *métissage* in the colonial Netherlands-Indies, as discussed by Stoler (2009), the *China baby* constituted a dangerous category, precisely because it suggested the loose sexual behaviour of Chinese men as well as blurred categories of class, both of which were intimately related to ethnic lines. Male rather than female promiscuity was seen as dangerous. *China babies* were growing up in the environment of the Ethiopian mother, whereas if the mother had been Chinese and the father Ethiopian, the child would have been raised in a Chinese environment. There was however, one exception. Qimo's Camp 108 accommodated one couple – a Chinese father (a water truck driver) and an Ethiopian mother (an English interpreter) – as well as their child. The couple had met in Addis Ababa. The baby girl, who looked Chinese, was being raised on the company premises under the auspices of the mother and other local employees, who took turns looking after the child. Even this benevolent arrangement was short lived; in February 2012 the couple left for Addis Ababa, where the father planned to set up his own garage service.

Sex, like food, could also be costly. A visit to a local prostitute cost on average ETB 200 in Mehoni; a price that could go up to ETB 500 in Alamata, where demand was higher and competition fiercer. Prostitutes commonly moved together with the construction works, transferring to places along the project road where the most building activities were taking place. The majority of clients of local prostitutes, I was told by Orange, a beautiful 17-year-old young woman from Sekota, Amhara regional state – and one of the most sought-after prostitutes in Mehoni – were not Chinese, but rather Ethiopian truck drivers passing through town, or drivers and operators employed by the Chinese, in particular those who proved successful at what was known on Ethiopian construction sites as *chifche* (petrol theft). *Chifche* occurred daily in the bushes along the road, in back streets, or back yards in town, or in the absence of Chinese superiors on the construction site. The practice was mostly initiated by local drivers before or after they had escorted their managers back to the compound, or by machine operators at night time. Petrol was taken secretly from four-wheel drives, pick-ups, dump and water trucks, excavators, and loaders. Chinese managers were well aware of the practice – albeit not its popular name – and yet they did not manage to control, let alone ban, the theft. In any case, cash earned by *chifche* meant that drivers could top up their salary, which in turn meant more disposable income. 'The prostitutes go where there is a lot of *chifche*', explained an Ethiopia surveyor who worked for the consultant and regularly visited what he liked to call 'bar ladies'. (He jokingly referred to venues with pretty bar ladies as 'benchmarks', a surveying term that stands for a sign or item along the road used to mark a point as an elevation reference.) A sought-after woman such as Orange could also play the money game. With the rejection of jobs under ETB 300, she could make up to ETB 3,000 per month (more than most employees of the Chinese). Orange was saving for a brokerage fee for migration to the Middle East, where she hoped to work as a domestic servant.

Ethiopian truck drivers were, however, not the only clients. Chinese clients also paid well, perhaps because the Chinese deemed themselves lucky to be in Ethiopia, where the women – tall and light-skinned – were believed to be the prettiest on the continent.

More than charm came into play in these encounters. When the asphalt plant crew went on holiday in the summer of 2011, one member on staff, Du Tianfu's cousin, was asked to remain in Mehoni to keep an eye on the plant and the residential compound along with three Chinese men he had befriended from Duyin Enterprise (from Shandong). The four men invited local women over for the night. When the asphalt plant crew returned, they were disturbed by the liberties taken by their local female staff, who, for instance, now walked freely into bedrooms. Displeased about this unwanted change in attitude (and behaviour), the crew dismissed both the kitchen assistant and the cleaning lady. Three days later the 24-year-old kitchen assistant returned to announce that she was pregnant by Du's cousin, demanding ETB 50,000 in restitution for damages. Should he decline to pay, she said she would take the case to court. Nobody knew for sure if the young woman was actually pregnant and what part Du's cousin had played in the incident, but the latter was willing to pay ETB 35,000 after bargaining. The woman refrained from going to court after she received the money; she then left Mehoni. Du's cousin, meanwhile, returned to China in October of that year to save the company from further awkward situations. Team members, though, including Du Tianfu, seemed rather indifferent about the case. Sometimes they even joked about it.

Even so, shameful acts by some members of the community could bring dishonour to the rest. Rumours about intercourse between Chinese men and Ethiopian women were regarded as spoiling the proper image of the Chinese and thus the credibility of their supremacy. The contamination of reputation by Chinese foremen who took liberties with Ethiopian women was strongly contested by the project manager, who ardently denied that *his* employees were engaged in prostitution. He was, however, quick to admit that

prostitution was endemic in subcontractor camps. Gu contended that he had made futile attempts to educate Chinese employees of subcontractors on these matters, but to no avail.

Gu's outright denial of the existence of sexual intercourse between his Chinese employees and local women can be seen as one more attempt to distinguish between migrants of a higher and lower stratum. Whereas his staff remained Chinese and retained Chineseness in its pure form, employees of subcontractors symbolized impurity and danger in their intimate relations with the local community (cf. Douglas 2002 [1966]). Any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins, Douglas contends, and although her focus is on margins of the body in society and ritual, the same can be said about the margins of social groups. Those who cross boundaries threaten to pollute the social group. On the road-building crews, internal boundaries and internal structure were used to indicate what was pure and what was less so, that is, to set off the so-called essence from the margins.

While this chapter has examined the Chinese community's internal divisions and rifts, as well as its external boundaries and boundary maintenance (Barth 1998 [1969]: 25), in the next chapter I will turn to interactions between Chinese managers and Ethiopian workers and the discursive boundaries drawn between them.

4. Fashioning Ethiopian Workers

> *Yesu s'afä s'afä gei ni money money? Yesu no gei ni money! Serra gei ni money money. Does Jesus write [on the timesheet] and give you money? Jesus does not give you money! Work gives you money*. (Li Hongde, 19 June 2012)

Li Hongde was having a word with his Ethiopian labourers. The 53-year-old Chinese manager had lost his temper. It was Saint Michael's day. Only half his crew had shown up for work, and the cleaning of the base-course in preparation for the application of the prime coat had to be carried out with fewer hands. Li expressed his displeasure by referring to Jesus, who represented the faith of his workers. In his eyes religion accounted for lack of discipline

and a lax work attitude and his words can be read as an implicit accusation of irrationality – to believe in Jesus rather than money. However, Li Hongde could only accommodate the situation. His harangue, directed at the workers who were present at work, was an attempt to teach what he saw as the essence of labour: the submission of the individual to production. Religion was an unnecessary distraction from what counted in life: productivity and the development of the self and society. Li himself had been a factory worker in a chemical plant in Liaoning province, northern China. When the factory no longer met environmental standards and had to shut its doors, he lost his job. After having worked as a bus driver for a few years, Li moved to Ethiopia in 2009. His convictions and ideas about labour derived from his past experiences as well as his motivations to leave for Ethiopia, which were chiefly financial.

In this chapter I discuss Chinese lower- and middle-level managers' attempts to fashion young Ethiopian men into industrial workers, a project that bears many resemblances to the formation of the Chinese worker subject in the period when China shifted from an agricultural and socialist state to an industrial and capitalist society (Pun 2005; Anagnost 1997). The Ethiopian worker was seen as lacking certain virtues crucial to industrial production. In order to retain control over labour and guarantee economic profitability, Chinese management sought to model the Ethiopian labourer on the worker subject that had proven so successful in China in the 1980s and 1990s: a worker who was humble, compliant, diligent, dexterous, self-motivated, and keen to improve his or her life. This was the rural migrant who had helped to realise the 'South China miracle' (Lee 1998) and who had played a key role in developing the country into the 'world's factory' (Pun and Lu 2010a). As members or children of the first generation of Chinese peasant workers, managers had contributed to rapid economic growth in China; consequently, they saw their efforts at disciplining the Ethiopian worker into 'a modern and efficient working body, a body of

praxis' (Pun 2005: 93), as justified by virtue of the expertise they themselves had gained from past experience.

Chinese management's concerted efforts met with little response. The Ethiopian worker remained intractable. What he (or she)[33] lacked, according to Chinese managers, was an urge towards self-improvement, or development of the self (*ziwo fazhan*) (H. Yan 2008: 192). Chinese perceptions of the worker's disposition, which included indolence, the inability to pick up things quickly, inertia, and lack of a sense of urgency, were all seen as impeding self-development. Chinese managers, however, failed to realise (or recognise) that what they saw as innate character traits of Ethiopian labourers were, in fact, part of a *reaction* against disciplinary techniques and labour principles. As Cooper (1997: 80) remarked in his study on Zanzibari and Kenyan plantation workers, 'work discipline is part of a structure, not a habit'. Worker *in*discipline was a form of defiance or protest against managerial caprice (cf. Alatas 1977). What is more, Chinese management had a fundamental interest in upholding the image of the Ethiopian worker as indolent and unproductive (Herman 1999; Burawoy 1972). The attempt to remake the Ethiopian into a highly productive worker proved a double-edged sword. On the one hand, Chinese workers tried to set an example, and to change the worker and his attitude in order to increase productivity – the very foundation on which Chinese presence in Ethiopia was warranted. Chinese companies won contracts because they carried out projects for low fees and were known to work fast. On the other hand, the dualism, in which Ethiopian workers and their work ethos were portrayed as 'backward' and Chinese managers' approach to work as 'modern', legitimised the chasm between the two parties in regard to production, for instance, as well as division of labour, wage scales, employment benefits, and work conditions.

[33] As the vast majority of workers were men, I use the male pronoun throughout the thesis.

4.1 Labour in Tigray

Employment with one of the Chinese road construction enterprises on the project was, for the majority of Tigrayan workers, their first experience with industrial wage labour. One might argue that the Chinese in south-eastern Tigray had put in motion a process of proletarianisation, that is, the social process by which people move from being self- or unemployed to being employed as wage workers, often associated with the transformation of peasants into industrial wage labourers. However, involvement in industrial wage labour in south-eastern Tigray was mostly temporary, indefinite, and far from unidirectional. Wages earned in road building were a minor addition to household income and engagement in industrial labour was of short duration. One study showed that non-farm income was a minor share (27 per cent) of the total income of households in rural Tigray (Vandercasteelen 2011). Almost 72 per cent of that non-farm income, however, was gained from participating in various forms of wage activities, including farm work, domestic work, or professional work (e.g. teacher, government worker, clerk, health worker) or skilled work (e.g. builder, thatcher, barber). Non-farm income was also derived from self-employment activities, such as livestock holding, milling, and handicrafts, or from selling food (e.g. cactus fruit and sugarcane), wood, and charcoal (ibid.).

At the start of the main construction work on the road, a significant number of young men and a small group of young women were drawn into the project, which numbered around 700 to 800 Ethiopian labourers at the peak of the construction work, in early 2012. About 20 per cent of the work force (my estimation) had previously worked for one of the Chinese employers on projects in adjacent regional states and had migrated with their companies to Tigray. The rest of the workers came from *woredas* along the project road, with about 70 per cent of those recruited from the three towns along the route (Alamata, Mehoni, and Adiqey) and Hewane, a few hundred metres away from the road's terminus. The remainder came from

rural settlements. Prior to joining the Chinese work force, local labourers had either been engaged in various trades, such as selling cactus fruit, sugar cane, or other commodities, or they had helped out in family businesses in the service or agricultural sector. Others had been in school or unemployed. According to the Central Statistical Agency (2012) the unemployment rate of the economically active male population in urban areas in Tigray – this includes Alamata, Mehoni, Adiqey, and Hewane – was 11 per cent (27 per cent for females), with 61.2 per cent of the population being economically active.

Chinese companies, contractor and subcontractors alike, rarely engaged in active labour recruitment. For one thing, labour was amply available. Men and women in search of employment commonly asked foremen on the building site if they could work for the company, or simply presented themselves at the gates of Chinese compounds. Only at the beginning of the project, or when a new company joined in, did Chinese employers have to make a conscious effort to recruit local workers. This was the case, for instance, when Lide commenced ditch construction in the mountain section, early in 2012. The limited number of able-bodied men and women available in Adiqey Town, where the Fujianese company was based, were already employed by one of the other subcontractors. The labour manager of Lide Construction had learned via hearsay that labourers in the area close to Gashena in Amhara regional state were willing to work for ETB 14 per day, in contrast to the ETB 25 (or more) per day labourers from Adiqey demanded. The next day he and the accountant left in an Isuzu truck for northern Amhara to recruit new workers. If Chinese employers were in need of particular types of skilled labourers, they commonly asked foremen to tap into their social networks. At the asphalt plant, it was Worku who had taken up this task. Although he was not native to the region, he had, nevertheless, built an impressive social network in Mehoni and surroundings.

Language with respect to labourers, and employers, for that matter, was telling. Unable to pronounce the syllable 'er' at the end of the English word, Chinese referred to a local worker as 'labour' – as in, for instance, '*yi ge labour come le*' ('Let one labourer come') or 'two labour go' ('Let two labourers go'). In Mandarin local labourers were called '*heigong*' ('black labourer') or '*xiaogong*' ('little labourer'). In official documents workers were termed '*ligong*' ('physical labourer') or '*linshigong*' ('temporary worker'). All these terms were used in the domestic labour market as well, referring to rural migrant workers. However, in China *heigong* means a worker with illegal status. In this context *hei* (black) refers to skin colour. Female workers, who were called '*heimei*' ('black sister') or '*xiaomei*' ('little sister'), were commonly employed as kitchen assistants or cleaning personnel. Operators, masons, and other skilled workers were, without exception, men. On-site female workers collected small stones for masonry work and carried jerry cans with water back and forth to keep the cement mix wet, or to spray water over layers of backfill material before compaction. Ethiopian labourers referred to their Chinese managers by their family names, preceded by the English title 'Mister' (e.g. Mister Liu, Mister Wang). The labourers also used this title among themselves when referring to their managers. That said, the use of the courtesy title did not always indicate respect for foreign superiors. Workers often pronounced it with a sense of wit, in such a way that the 'Mister' could be perceived as questioning, rather than affirming, the manager's status and authority.

Labourers, once they were engaged, showed up for work as if they had walked in off the street, that is, no work clothing was provided. Labourers simply wore outfits similar to those of the Chinese foremen: baggy trousers or jeans, short-sleeved shirts, sweaters, or filthy suit-jackets, and plastic sandals or canvas shoes. No gloves, helmets, or shoes with soles suitable for treading on hot tarmac, or for climbing steep slopes or sand heaps, were provided. The failure of Chinese employers to provide Ethiopian employees with work clothing and

safety equipment became a bone of contention, particularly between Chinese management and Ethiopian consultant engineers, who saw the lack of health and safety measures as a sign of disrespect vis-à-vis the local work force, and Ethiopians in general. (The situation was not very different in the capital city, where these practices were subject to fiercer critique.) The only yellow safety helmet I spotted on the building site was used for carrying water to sprinkle cement; at the asphalt plant, helmets were safely stored rather than used. In contrast, all Ethiopian employees of the Japanese company that installed electric pumps and water pipes in the Raya region wore work outfits and safety helmets. 'Surely in their country they [the Chinese] keep to safety prescriptions. They just do not want to spend money on Africa', remarked a consultant engineer.

Local labourers were at the bottom of the employment ladder. No Ethiopians exercised authority over any Chinese within the Chinese companies. Labour was segregated along ethnic lines in a fashion resembling the colour bar principle of colonial times (and post-colonial times), in which Africans were denied access to the same rights, opportunities, and facilities as white people (Burawoy 2009: 27). Ethnic segregation also limited promotion opportunities for Ethiopian workers, and as Chinese enterprises held on to an all-Chinese management, jeopardised employment opportunities for educated Ethiopians. Menial labour (work that required little skill and lacked prestige) and skilled physical labour (e.g. operation of machines, masonry, and carpentry) were carried out by Ethiopians, whereas the higher-end jobs that implied supervision and mental work were reserved for Chinese. This division of labour had repercussions in everything from employment contracts and welfare benefits to mundane matters, such as food and transportation. Taken as a whole, the discrepancies were profound. Chinese expatriates signed their contract agreements in China; these contracts included distinct terms and conditions that fell under the Chinese juridical system. If local employees signed labour contracts at all, these agreements were subject to Ethiopian labour

law. Chinese employees received allowances (or pocket money), local employees did not. Chinese and Ethiopian workers were subject to two separate sets of disciplinary rules with respect to behaviour during work time. Daily meals were only provided to Chinese employees, as were housing, medicine, water and other drinks, and toiletries. Pick-up and truck cabins were reserved for Chinese passengers; Ethiopian labourers were required to stand in the back.

One of the most prominent aspects in which the separation in labour relations was expressed was the wage system. Pay scales for Ethiopians were separate from wage payment arrangements for Chinese employees, who received their salaries in CNY or partly in USD in bank accounts in China. Wages of Ethiopian labourers were calculated in days of work and distributed in cash – a pile of bank notes held together with a rubber band. Wages ranged from ETB 15 to 35[34] per day for non-skilled workers and between ETB 30 and 80 for skilled workers (e.g. loader operators, drivers, masons, surveyors). In Ethiopia wage levels varied per region and fluctuated heavily, due to the rapid depreciation of the Ethiopian currency as well as worker demands for higher wages. In Mille, Golden Roads had paid unskilled labourers no more than ETB 20 per day (between 2008 and 2010). In Mehoni, most labourers earned between ETB 25 and 30 (as of 2011). Accordingly, bargaining about wages became increasingly important. And incidents of labour protest forced managers to raise wages. When the Chinese started road building in Addis Ababa in the late 1990s, they had paid ETB 5 to 6 per worker per day. The exact amount of ETB differed per worker and depended on years of service as well as work performance, which often came down to obedience to management and the sheer effort put into the work at hand. Wages were also gendered. Female labourers earned significantly lower wages, between ETB 11 and 20 per day. Grader operators received the highest salaries. My friend Ahmed earned ETB 10,000 per month as

[34] These numbers are approximations. Wage levels fluctuated heavily, and differed between Chinese companies on the project.

grader operator for Jianghe and was one of the best-paid Ethiopian employees of the Chinese. (He was also one of the wealthiest Ethiopian men in Adiqey.) Wages were spent on material items, such as houses and clothing, or saved to realise a dream popular among rural and less privileged Ethiopians, to migrate to the Middle East, for work.[35]

At the start of the road project the contractor had indicated that there were guidelines for local wage levels. In practice, Chinese companies decided wages independently, based on previous experience and wage levels of fellow subcontracting companies. Salaries paid by Chinese companies to Ethiopian employees were thus a bone of contention. They were not considered proper wages by Ethiopian workers (for similar observations in Mozambique, see Nielsen 2012, and in Tanzania, Lee 2009). To work for China House, as some local workers refer to employers pejoratively, was described as offering 'free service' and classified as exploitation. 'Our salaries are too low. That's because the Chinese are not scared of God. They do not believe in heaven'. One foreman explained why local salaries were low: 'One *injera* costs 8 ETB nowadays. Say they [the workers] spend 6 ETB on breakfast and 8 ETB on both lunch and dinner. They have 6 ETB left on a daily salary of 30 ETB. And I am only talking about food'. For ETB 6 one could get a pint of yoghurt, a cup of milk with a bread roll, or *full*, a local dish consisting of flat bread for dipping in a sauce made from bean powder and pepper in a regular breakfast house (*k'urs bet*) in Mehoni. For dishes in restaurants, one spent ETB 10 or more. When labourers did not have family members living in town, they usually bought loose *injera* and prepared something on the side themselves or sprinkled the *injera* with sugar. According to Solomon Elias, who worked for the RCE, local wages constituted the main 'problem' between the Chinese and the local population. 'If the salary is too low, you cannot command respect. A worker will think about ways to increase his income the whole day. Especially the guards. They are the backbone of the company. If

[35] Urban and more privileged Ethiopians commonly wished to migrate to the United States.

you cannot even trust them….' Similar to the failure to provide safety equipment, low salaries had become a symbol of Chinese disrespect for Ethiopian workers. Not surprisingly, discord about wages came to a climax on payday, usually the fifth day of each month.

Although Chinese wage-payment arrangements varied between state-owned and private companies, the treatment of the Ethiopian work force was comparable across the board, especially with respect to non- and semi-skilled labour. The remnants of a socialist ethos that applied to employment conditions (e.g. welfare benefits) for Chinese staff members of SOEs did not apply to Ethiopian workers. All Chinese companies were capitalist – or pre-capitalist – enterprises where local employment was concerned. Chinese employers were reputed for docking wages as a disciplinary method. As well, they failed to provide social wages. And yet, despite complaints by Ethiopian labourers about the level of income provided by Chinese companies, salaries were not significantly lower than those in the local construction industry, or those for comparable jobs in other sectors. Wages of unskilled labourers, for instance, equalled those of lower-level civil servants, and were higher than wages earned by service workers in bars and hotels. There was no set minimum wage in Ethiopia, although some government institutions set their own minimum wages. Public sector employees, the largest group of wage earners in Ethiopia, had a minimum wage of ETB 420 per month, and employees in the banking and insurance sector ETB 336. The estimate for the poverty income level was circa ETB 315 per month (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor 2012). Salaries offered by Chinese companies ranged well above these minimums. What is more, salaries were adjusted regularly. Daily wages of un- and semi-skilled labourers rose from ETB 5 to 15 (depending on the company and the type of employment) in the months between my arrival on the project in December 2011 and my departure in September 2012. 'The Chinese have driven up salaries', remarked a manager of an Ethiopian subcontractor, who was irritated by the fact. 'Before the Chinese came here wage labourers

were much cheaper. They must have been around 17 ETB'. Yet it was in fact local labourers who had driven up wage levels through strikes and protests, and by using their labour mobility to demand higher wages.

Wage-payment arrangements were also contested among the Chinese employees. Most migrants were unaware that they could withdraw money by UnionPay (*yinlian*) at ATMs in major Ethiopian cities, such as Addis Ababa and Mekele. Usually they used their allowances received in ETB, popularly known as *xilifei* (literally: wash and tidy up money), for personal expenses, or they borrowed cash from the company manager. Borrowing from the managers could be problematic. Lao Zhao, the managing director of Wuhe, for instance, conveniently held on to the CNY 1 to ETB 1 exchange rate that had applied when he first arrived in Ethiopia in 2007, in spite of the depreciation of the Ethiopian currency – in 2012 CNY 1 was worth around ETB 3.5. Meanwhile, Chinese employees of Wuhe found other ways to come by funds. The young female interpreter, who occasionally travelled to Mekele to purchase spare parts and food stuffs, had discovered UnionPay at Dashen Bank in the city and would lend colleagues money from her own bank account. Or she bought them Nyala Premium or Marlboro cigarettes in exchange for favours. Others were said to trade in eggs and other local products to earn a bit of cash.

Pay irregularities prompted employees to have family members in China check the balance of migrants' bank accounts, especially in the case of those employees who worked for private companies. Wage payments were often overdue, or salaries not transferred at all over several months. The managing director of Golden Roads had made a contractual arrangement with most of his Chinese employees that salary payments for the first six months of the contract would be postponed; it was not until after this period that the deferred salary was gradually paid in addition to the regular monthly income. His explanation was that the company needed the money as a deposit against potential hazards during the start-up phase.

Not surprisingly, most crew members were unaware of this clause when they signed their contracts. Employment contracts were set up by the contractor and meant to be given to employees of subcontractors in the original, but in practice, managing directors of private subcontractors fiddled with contracts, adding or changing clauses to their own benefit. So it was, for instance, that the percentage of regular wage earned during the holidays in China was significantly reduced in the case of employees of Golden Roads – a practice that the contractor seemed to be either unaware of, or to tolerate.

Salary levels, while discussed among Chinese employees, were rarely raised in conversations with Ethiopians. Sometimes local workers speculated among themselves about how much their managers earned; they knew Chinese were savers and that they earned much more than any Ethiopian was earning. Wages of fellow Ethiopians, though, were of greater interest. All local employees were aware of how much the best-paid Ethiopian in the company earned, which in turn fuelled competition and envy between locals over income. It was the Chinese wage levels, however, which were frankly unattainable. From the Chinese perspective, ethnic differences, intertwined with a hierarchy based on type of employment (e.g. physical versus mental work), were legitimising factors that justified wage disparity, and secrecy with respect to level of income contributed to the persistence of this dualism in employment arrangements. How was this dualism behind these discriminatory employment conditions justified by Chinese workers? Before taking a closer look at their perceptions and discourse, I will discuss the socio-economic context of Chinese views of Ethiopian workers.

4.2 *Dagongren* and the Chinese construction industry

Chinese lower- and middle-level managers compared Ethiopian workers with their counterparts in the domestic building industry, modelling them after the first generation of

workers (*dagongren*, or alternatively *nongmingong*)[36] in China who had left the countryside for the city in the 1980s and 1990s. The rapidly growing urban economy had increased the demand for cheap and flexible labour and triggered a large wave of rural migrants to China's urban regions (Pun and Lu 2010a; Solinger 1999). In pre-reform urban China employment was allocated by the state (Fan 2002: 106), and job mobility was low. This changed when market principles were introduced into the labour market. The established urban proletariat, consisting of factory workers (*gongren*)[37] who had been protected by the socialist social contract, which provided cradle-to-grave welfare benefits, saw their privileged status threatened by the influx of migrants from the countryside (Solinger 1999; Lee 2002). The transition to what has been coined 'market socialism' was, however, characterised by an absence of legal regulations and state control, especially in the expanding non-state sector. Attempts by the Chinese government to retain its regulatory power by introducing 'rule by law' proved of limited success (Lee 2007).

The existing legal system discriminated against migrants from the countryside.[38] For this reason peasant workers at the time have often been referred to as 'second class citizens' (Zhang 2001; Solinger 1999). *Dagongren* faced tough employment conditions, such as substandard wages, long work days, disciplinary violence, and a pervasive lack of legal protection. Excluded from the more prestigious and desirable jobs reserved for permanent urban residents, *dagongren* were relegated to the bottom, taking dirty, dangerous, and low-paying jobs (Fan 2002). When the state sector started employing migrants from the countryside, they did so only as contract workers, denying them the benefits to which permanent staff members were entitled. This form of discrimination still exists, even in Chinese state-owned companies in Ethiopia. The two brothers from Hebei introduced in the

[36] *Dagongren* emphasises the worker's type of employment, whereas *nongmingong* emphasises the rural background of the worker.
[37] *Gong* stands for work. *Ren* refers to people in general.
[38] Discrimination was mainly based on (or justified by) the household registration (*hukou*) system, which was interwoven with the distribution of social services (e.g. medical services, education, and housing).

previous chapter belonged to this category: they were employed under temporary, project-based contracts. They received their income, which was significantly lower than that of their colleagues, who were full employees of the company (*danwei de ren*), entirely in CNY and were not entitled to particular benefits, such as an urban *hukou* or housing subsidy in China.

As high as 30 per cent of all rural migrants in China have been employees of the construction sector (Pun and Lu 2010b: 144), in which they were either linked to state firms or employed by construction gangs composed of rural migrants. By the mid-1980s fully one-third of the work force of state construction firms consisted of peasant workers (Solinger 1999: 210-5). The multi-level subcontracting system that came into existence with the growth of the sector has partly contributed to the exploitation of peasant workers. In China, large construction consortia – in road building, mostly national-level SOEs – control the market through close ties with property developers and local governments. These SOEs outsource the actual building work to several so-called 'big contractors' ('*dabao*'), which provide building materials and labour.[39] These 'big contractors' in turn rely on subcontractors, called '*xiaobao*' ('small contractor') or '*qingbao*' ('"clean up" contractor'), for supplying labour; these companies not only recruit labourers but also manage daily work on-site and arrange wage payments after the completion of a project. Sometimes these subcontractors turn to 'labour-use facilitators' ('*daigong*') or labour bosses, who use kin and village networks to recruit workers (ibid.: 149). During the transition period (e.g. 1990s), especially, non-industrial social relations and kin networks facilitated the recruitment of rural migrants. A common practice was for *daigong* to recruit a certain number of people, depending on the size of the project, just after Chinese New Year. Workers would then be paid at the end of the project or by the next Chinese New Year. Relations between labour bosses and peasant

[39] In Mille Golden Roads was a *dabao* contractor. The company was responsible for purchasing bitumen and other raw materials as well for carrying out the works. In Mehoni RCE kept the provision of materials in its own hands.

workers were based on trust and mutual social obligations. With many relatives in the home village, it was difficult for labour bosses to avoid responsibilities.

In this multi-level subcontracting system, risks are easily shifted down the chain. Chinese subcontractors on the Ethiopian road project routinely outsourced jobs that were potentially risky, mostly to Ethiopian companies. Wuhe, for instance, hired a local company to ferry asphalt aggregate by dump truck from the quarry at kilometre 102, in the mountains, to the asphalt plant of Golden Roads. Needless to say, the greater the distance and the windier the road, the greater the risk of traffic accidents and *chifche* (petrol theft). Wuhe therefore made sure that the local company was responsible for vehicle damage and the purchase of its own petrol, so that if *chifche* did occur the Chinese company would not have to pay. Wuhe's strategy mirrored practices in China. As the construction sector in China developed, rural building teams gained a competitive edge over urban counterparts. Whereas wages were comparable with urban construction workers, rural work gangs worked longer days and enjoyed fewer rest days (Solinger 1999: 210-15). However, as the labour subcontracting system matured in the late 1990s, the rural work force was left without state or social protection. Many casual workers did not receive regular payments, neither did they sign legal employment contracts, as required by the Labour Law promulgated in 1995 (Pun and Lu 2010b: 150). In other words, exploitation was rife (Solinger 1999: 214-15).

The inferior status of rural migrants in the cities legitimized the widespread exploitation of their labour (Fan 2002: 109). *Dagong* has come to symbolize the process of turning peasants into working subjects of capitalist 'bosses' (Pun 2005: 12). The term *dagong* is associated with the commodification of labour – with labour that can be dismissed at will and replaced by anyone who is willing to sell his or her labour for a lower price. While *dagong* stands for extremely flexible terms of employment, *dagongren* refers to those who willingly and keenly subject themselves to capitalist production (H. Yan 2008: 189). The

formation of industrial selves was seen as a process of self-submission or self-sacrifice that implied stringent managerial supervision and disciplinary techniques. Chinese official and media representations have portrayed *dagongren* from the countryside as 'a homogeneous group of aimless and ignorant people driven by poverty' (Zhang 2001: 31). The image of first-generation peasant migrants as dirty, uneducated, and of low *suzhi* and *wenhua* was juxtaposed against permanent urban residents, to whom the contrary characteristics were ascribed. A similar divide, which derived not only from class oppression but also from ethnic discrimination, was, I will show, reproduced between Chinese foremen and Ethiopian labourers.

Since the 2000s, Chinese peasant workers have become more aware of their rights and articulate in defending these rights. By filing petitions and lawsuits for collective labour arbitration, mediation, and litigation, such workers have managed to improve employment conditions (e.g. wage increases, shorter work days, and better safety standards) (Lee 2007). Notwithstanding, the worker on which Chinese managers modelled their Ethiopian workers was a typical first-generation rural migrant. Acquiescent to capitalist principles of profit maximisation and submissive to the labour process, he or she was a worker who was willing to make sacrifices at the cost of physical and mental well-being in order to earn as much money as possible for a better life in the future. This worker thus agreed to work whatever hours (including overtime) were set by the manager and to comply with the demands of superiors.

The majority of Chinese foremen on-site, referred to as 'head of workers' ('*gongzhang*'), had been peasant workers in China, mostly in the building sector. Zhao Yi, who was 49 years old, was the first Chinese I met upon arriving in Alamata. He proudly told me that he had built 'everything' in Fujian province. Zhao had left his home province Anhui for Fujian in the early 1990s. His wife in China had passed away and in Alamata he found a

new wife, a 17-year-old local girl. They married in the company's compound in the mountains close to Adiqey on New Year's Day in 2012, in the presence of his younger brothers, *lao si* (fourth child), *lao wu* (fifth child) and *lao wu*'s 19-year-old son, all of whom worked for Qimo Construction. Zhao himself was *lao san* (third child). *Lao da*, the eldest child, was head of their home village in Fuyang prefecture, Anhui province, and had his duties back home. *Lao er* (second child) also lived in China. Zhao Yi always beamed, especially when interacting with Ethiopians, regardless of their age, and was very popular with local boys, who often came to ask if they could work with him or run an errand (e.g. buying water or cigarettes) for one ETB. He would also shout a heartfelt '*labour yälläm, labour yälläm*!' ('No labour, no labour!') or '*labour gou le*!' ('There are enough labourers!') when local men and women asked for jobs.

Chinese foremen like Zhao did not hesitate to roll up their sleeves and work alongside Ethiopian labourers to demonstrate techniques, or simply to kill time. Even so, there loomed the fact of a peculiar role reversal: one-time peasant workers from China had become managers in secure positions far away from home. Their ethnic background protected their status in the company hierarchy; moreover, they were considered wealthy men in the eyes of local people. But the years that Zhao Yi and his brothers had spent in the burning sun on construction sites at home and abroad were written on their faces and hands and distinguished them from Chinese middle-level managers. I had to look twice to see if Zhao Yi was Chinese and not Ethiopian when I first saw him in a local restaurant, gulping down spaghetti, simply because of his dark skin colour. In addition, Zhao and his colleagues wore overalls with blue camouflage print they had bought in a local shop, and they walked in sturdy black leather police shoes purchased in Mekele. By contrast, educated engineers of different specialisations wore light-coloured ironed shirts and dark trousers. They were often the children of first-generation peasant workers and were the first generation in their families to have enjoyed a

higher education. Nonetheless, these engineers had inherited a puritan work attitude from their parents. What separated the first from the second generation was their connection to the land and the birth village. Although the former talked about returning to the countryside, the latter aspired to a future life in the city. What both generations harboured was an intense desire for upward mobility, if not for themselves then for their offspring.

What Chinese had not counted on was that Ethiopian labourers would prove to be more articulate than the first-generation Chinese rural migrants, showing neither the respect, nor the awe, for their foreign employers that peasant workers had borne for their urban or foreign managers in China's early post-reform period. Class differences on shop floors and on construction sites in China were ingrained in a history of inequality between city and countryside that was deeply rooted in state ideology and policy (e.g. in the institution of the household registration). Ethiopian society is also characterised by a rural-urban divide, but as outsiders and newcomers, the Chinese did not have a place in this hierarchy. They had yet to confirm their status and establish their authority – a process that the Ethiopian work force actively and successfully resisted. In return, local workers' discontent was met with disbelief, and the failure to discipline workers and shape them according to the Chinese *dagongren* of the 1980s and 1990s was linked to the failure to meet production targets and retain economic profitability.

4.3 The Ethiopian worker and his disposition

Chinese management had envisaged the process of turning young Ethiopian men into industrial worker subjects as going well, and smoothly. In actual fact, the longer managers spent in Africa, the more disillusioned they became. In managers' eyes the Ethiopian worker not only remained indolent, he became increasingly rebellious. The project of disciplining workers turned out to be arduous and cumbersome. What Chinese managers failed to realise

(or recognise) was that the behaviour of Ethiopian labourers, including their indolent attitude, was in large part a *response* to Chinese labour practices and principles. Consequently, management's efforts to discipline Ethiopian workers, as I will demonstrate in the next chapter, had the exact reverse effects. On the other hand, it was in management's interest to confirm the image of the indolent African worker, as this image upheld the dualism between us (modern and disciplined) and them (traditional and indolent) – the very dualism that underpinned relations of production and that justified wage disparities as well as inequalities in labour division. The Ethiopian worker and his disposition were scapegoated to account for low productivity levels.

Where exactly did the Ethiopian worker fail in management's eyes? The problem, as Chinese managers phrased it, was the Ethiopian's lack of ambition, or urge to develop the self (*ziwo fazhan*) – virtues nursed by Chinese migrants as members, or as the children, of first-generation peasant workers in China. I asked Peng Gaofei, site manager of RCE, to name the differences between the Ethiopian worker and the Chinese worker.

> If you promote a Chinese worker and give him a higher salary, he feels that he has prospects for development. He will work even harder. But a local worker, if you give him a promotion and raise his salary, the first thing he will think is: 'If my abilities are that high, then my salary does not fit my abilities, you should give me more salary or a better position. But you cannot give me this'. He chooses to go to another place to work. This is the main difference between a Chinese and a local worker. (Peng Gaofei, 31 May 2012)

Peng identified the ability and the willingness to improve the self as the main difference between a Chinese and an Ethiopian worker. He described the Ethiopian male worker as demanding and greedy, as a figure whose expectations did not match his abilities. Monetary rewards, Peng believed, had a reverse effect on Ethiopian labourers. Peng also touched on what he saw as arrogance in the local worker – of knowing better than his supervisor. The Chinese worker, instead, subordinates himself to superiors in the production process. He works hard in order to be able to reap the benefits of labour. And after having tasted these benefits, he is driven to work even harder.

This so-called lack of an urge to develop the self resulted in what Chinese managers viewed as an irrational attitude towards productivity and wealth-creation. Ethiopian labourers did not respond to monetary incentives, Chinese managers often grumbled. Workers were unwilling to work night shifts or extra hours, even when they were paid two or three times their regular salaries. Veteran Hu Chunfu explained:

> When we first came to Addis Ababa [in 1997], there was nothing. There were hardly any roads. In the beginning we worked very hard: ten to eleven hours per day. But the Ethiopians did not want to work over-time. They were not used to it. Now we have taught them what over-hours are. It is slightly better now. (Hu Chunfu, 7 September 2011)

The unwillingness to subject oneself to production and profit maximisation was described by managers as backwards (*luohou*). In Hu's eyes this willingness was something that could be taught and thus acquired over time. And yet there were critical impediments, one of which was devotion to religion. Li Hongde's message, as quoted at the opening of this chapter, was that it was not Jesus (or God) who provides for a livelihood, but money earned through hard work. The Chinese manager saw religion as a distraction to what was most important in life: productivity and the development of the self and society. Religion was also commonly associated with absenteeism. Workers tended to stay away from work on religious holidays, which sparked strife between Chinese managers and Ethiopian workers. Moreover, religion was perceived as producing contentment. Pointing at his workers, a Chinese grader operator once said: 'These black boys (*hei xiaozi*) are happy. They believe in Jesus. They are easily satisfied. They are already pleased when their bellies are full'. In sum, satisfaction with life was seen to interfere with the ambition to improve the self.

'Does God give you money? Does God give you a house? Does God give you food?' the mechanic Chen Delin teased his workers during the Chinese Spring Festival. And to me: 'Look, we continue working on holidays'. 'You work, but the people in China don't', smirked one of the labourers. Chen flashed a look at the worker, and switched topics. The day before Chinese New Year on 22 January 2012, the asphalt machinery was transferred from

Alamata, where the town section had been finished the night before, to kilometre 58, at the start of the mountain section. The machinery was being checked for faults and cleaned by local workers. After the company manager, Chen Delin, was finished we sat down on one of the green Xugong asphalt machines under the yellow sun screen. Every now and then Chen received a text message from family and friends in China on his cell phone. Chen explained that the most difficult aspect of working in Ethiopia was not only the distance from kin but also what he called the 'obstacles in thinking and communication' ('*sixiang jiaoliu zhang'ai*'). 'Everybody loves money, true or not? But if *they* have a holiday, you give them twice or three times as much salary, they still go to "God House"'. The fact that labourers were not willing to work on holidays or at night for a higher reward was met with disbelief. Chinese, on the other hand, asserted that they willingly sacrificed holidays for the opportunity to earn additional income.

The other problem with the Ethiopian worker, according to Chinese managers, was his inability 'to comprehend a problem' ('*wenti de renzhi lijie*'). Development of the self was linked to competence and the willingness to learn. 'If you explain a problem to a Chinese worker, if you do it once, you don't have to explain it twice. Locals are different'. Chinese foremen often complained that they had to demonstrate certain building techniques multiple times. 'You teach them [Ethiopians] bar binding one day, and they have forgotten it the next day. You have to teach them over and over again'. Due to inability, or simply the lack of commitment to developing skills, the Ethiopian worker was believed to be inefficient. Lian Zhengyou put it so: 'If you tell your Chinese workers what they have to do, they will do it themselves. Here you have to go through a lot of trouble (*feixin*). The efficiency is very low (*xiaolüfei di*). Locals are much less effective workers. They are not accustomed to work[ing] hard'. Whereas the Chinese worker was perceived as independent and self-motivated, the Ethiopian worker was portrayed as dependent and unmotivated. Lian was, notably,

approaching efficiency as a variable based on the Ethiopian worker's effort alone. Peng Gaofei explained the inability to grasp problems by referring to the low 'level of culture' ('*wenhua chengdu*') of particular regions, such as Africa.

Lack of self-control has also been mentioned as another inferior character trait. Comparing Chinese with African workers, reference was made again and again to the dichotomy between the rational and self-controlled (Chinese worker) versus the emotional and impulsive (Ethiopian worker). Local labourers were seen as led by instinct rather than by careful considerations, and by sentiment rather than reason. Wildcat strikes, sit-downs, and work stoppages were often taken as examples of the inability of Ethiopians to control their feelings. I asked Peng Gaofei how he responded to labour strikes.

> To start with, we treat people with reason (*yi li fu ren*). You tell them [local workers] that their demands are unreasonable (*bu heli*). Secondly, you tell them that what they did is illegal. Thirdly, you tell them that they violated the guiding principles, rules, and requirements of the company. Fourthly, you give [them] a very good option, to go back to the [former] position and continue working.… We need people who bring about performance (*yeji*) and we need effective people (*chengxiao de ren*)…we will not severely deduct money from your salaries (*he kou nimen de gongzi*) to exploit (*zhaqu*) the labour force. We judge appropriately, according to the nature of your work, we set a wage limit according to the level of your labour. It does not work like: you see someone else's salary is high, and you like to earn the same high salary, because somebody else is more diligent. So, if you once more persist, and take the lead to go on a strike, then sorry, we can only ask you to go and work somewhere else and find a salary that suits your demands. (Peng Gaofei, 31 May 2012)

Peng's tone of voice – confident and authoritative – is striking, given his young age. The 25-year-old site manager grew up in rural Shandong. His parents were subsistence farmers; in Peng's words, 'they grow what they eat' ('*ziji zhong ziji chi*'). When Peng entered university in Qingdao, his father left the land to work in the city, but when Peng began his present job, he insisted his parents stay home to grow old (*zhang lao*). Peng Gaofei told me that his motivation to go far away (*dalaoyuan*) was to earn a better salary, but he also saw his job in Ethiopia as a chance to let go of one's hold (*fangshou yi bu*) and discover the world. Peng had been recruited at university. He signed a five-year contract with his present company, leaving behind his girlfriend, who worked as a personnel manager in an enterprise that

bottled beverages in Shandong. Only one other classmate (of 41 civil engineering students) had also decided to go abroad. That classmate worked in the Congo, but, Peng felt it important to emphasise, for a company comparable to Qimo Construction – an experience, Peng asserted, of a different order. (He assumed I was aware of the inferior employment conditions.) The wording Peng used in his judgement of Ethiopian workers embodied the same ideas possessed by seasoned management, suggesting rationality on the part of the speaker and irrationality on the part of the striking workers. Pitting the notion of the rational, reasonable manager against the irrational, ostensibly mindless labourer was so common that 'they don't speak with reason (*jiang daoli* or *shuo li*)' was a much-repeated complaint about Ethiopian workers.

Absenteeism was another sore spot. On 21 August 2012 Prime Minister Meles Zenawi passed away. Flags were hung at half-mast from the electricity poles. The face of Meles, as he was called by Ethiopians, also graced advertisements boards, shop cases, car windows, and stickers on the side mirrors of trucks and pick-ups. Young men walked around selling posters of portraits of the deceased. Throughout the two weeks of national mourning, labourers frequently stayed away from work. The ceremonies surrounding the death of Meles Zenawi took a long time – too long, according to the Chinese. 'One day one worker stays away, the other day another worker stays away, the next day again another worker asks if he can go to town', explained Li Hongde. 'If a public figure dies in China, people mourn for, at most, three days. Then they go back to work. Chinese have to work. They have to make money to buy food'. Once again, the economically rational Chinese were contrasted to the irresponsible Ethiopians, who were not only seen as emotional but also indolent as far as sensible labour practices were concerned.

The Chinese words *lan*, *landuo*, or *lansan* (lazy), which were often used to describe the work attitude of African labourers, constitute the last, and perhaps most frequently

mentioned, character trait of the Ethiopian worker to trouble Chinese management. Indolence derived not just from the lack of contact with, or experience of working in, an industrious environment like that in China, managers argued, but was also part of the natural disposition of Africans. Chinese managers believed that, by setting an example of how to work hard, they could show what self-motivation looked like. Regardless, at the end of the day African workers would, in the eyes of management, still remain rather lazy. This persistent notion is reminiscent of what Burawoy (1972: 250-6) has identified as the myth of worker indolence, that is, the (false) belief of management and authorities that the African worker is somewhat lazier than other workers – a conviction used to justify the introduction of certain disciplinary measures or the implementation of government policies. This myth scapegoats the African worker for unmet targets in the production process and diverts attention away from other causes of low productivity.

In south-eastern Tigray multiple factors actually contributed to inefficiency in the building process, such as inexperienced management, poor logistics, idle or dysfunctional machinery and equipment, financial shortages, delays in transport of construction materials, and so forth: causes for which company management commonly bears the sole responsibility. Even so, at least some Ethiopian consultant engineers endorsed the myth of worker indolence. They explained indolence, however, not as innate to Ethiopian people or society, but as the result of environmental and material conditions. ‘It is true, Ethiopians are a bit lazy. That is because of the climate. It is not warm here, and it is not cold either. You don’t need a roof over your head. You can just sleep in the open air. There is no need for Ethiopians to become creative’. The climate was also the reason why, Tesfay Adane explained, the excavator was not invented in Africa. Originally designed to dig and transport snow, the machine, according to him, could only have been invented in the northern hemisphere. Despite external or

mitigating factors, as far as the Chinese were concerned, what contributed to the lifestyle and attitude of Ethiopians was strictly his or her internal disposition.

Not surprisingly, Chinese managers regarded African labour with a certain degree of mistrust. Ethiopians will work only when they are compelled to do so, they argued – or as Li Hongde put it in creole: '*China look look, serra allä. China no look look, serra yälläm*' ('If a Chinese watches, the work is carried out. If there is no Chinese to watch, there is no work being carried out'). In the eyes of Chinese managers, Ethiopian labourers lacked a certain inner motivation to work hard and to carry out work well; this lingering suspicion also meant the Chinese were hesitant to transfer responsibility. Management made sure that on every building site along the project road, a Chinese foreman was present to supervise the work. Ethiopian labourers were often described as tough and 'taking a lot of trouble' ('*feixin*'), a statement which indicated general annoyance with the Ethiopian work force. What exactly the 'trouble' was, was undefined, although one of the main frustrations appeared to be the adjustment of time management. Chinese managers complained that they were unable to carry out work according to schedule, because of worker tardiness.

> If we start work at eight o'clock, they [local workers] will come at nine o'clock. We cannot do anything but wait.… If we want to cast concrete for a bridge, we have to start early, especially when the consultant comes by at a certain time to supervise the work and check the concrete. If we want to start at seven o'clock, our workers come at eight or even nine o'clock. So we have to tell them to come at six o'clock, but that does not always work either. (Lian Zhengyou, 14 September 2011)

Worker indolence was also used to explain high absenteeism rates and a high turnover of labourers. 'Some workers only come to work to let the foreman tick off their names'. Sneaking away from work was seen as an evil habit of local workers; this, despite the fact that, in reality, such incidents were rare.

The turnover among Ethiopian employees was, however, relatively high. Between January and September the asphalt plant crew hired three new kitchen assistants and three cleaning ladies. The first kitchen assistant saved enough money to pay the brokerage fee of a

migrant agency that would facilitate her move to Qatar, to take up work as domestic servant. The second kitchen assistant left upset, after the cook, Lian Du, in a moment of rage, kicked her in the buttocks. The first cleaning lady found a better paying job with another Chinese employer. The second cleaner was fired after she was suspected of stealing sugar and onions. The turnover among male workers at the asphalt plant was also relatively high. Apart from a core group of four labourers who had moved with Golden Roads from Affar, and three local workers from Mehoni who had stayed on since the beginning of the project, the remaining workers came and went, and the numbers fluctuated. For example, in the month of February 2012 alone, four workers left after a labour strike, two workers resigned at different points in time, and two workers were dismissed under suspicion of theft (bitumen drums). The road crew aside, the turnover of security personnel was even higher.

Of note, though, is that Chinese companies actually paved the way for this high worker turnover. The labour regime adopted by Chinese companies was based on highly flexible and temporary employment, and the casualty of labour was epitomised by the notion that employees were simply replaceable. If a worker did not act according to the rules, it was common practice for his Chinese manager to say: '*huan yi ge*!' ('Replace one!'). The social and emotional distance between expatriate managers and local labourers, reinforced by language barriers and cultural disparities, invariably led to a certain de-personification of the labourer. With arbitrary lay-offs so common, they became the first and foremost reason for local workers to lodge lawsuits against their Chinese employers.

The attitude towards local workers stood in sharp contrast with the job security of managers themselves, especially those working for Chinese SOEs. If a Chinese employee misbehaved in the eyes of his superior, a certain amount of money could be deducted from his salary, or, in severe cases, the person in question would be transferred to another project in another African country. One of the truck managers of Duyin enterprise from Shandong

who was often caught drunk during work time was transferred to Ghana after completion of the previous project, 'until they send him away again', predicted his manager. In response to casual labour practices of hiring and firing, some local workers took their contractual obligations less than seriously. Not only was '*huan yi ge*!' commonly said, so was '*yi ge labour pao le*!' ('A labourer has run away!'). Secondly, the competition between Chinese employers triggered job mobility among local labourers, who exploited this competition over labour to drive up wages. Workers simply left one company for another if the salary was not satisfying and another company offered better pay; such was the case with one of the cleaning ladies. Labourers, as I will show in the next chapter, were adept at appropriating ideas promulgated by management, and using those ideas against them.

Criticism by Chinese lower- and middle-level managers was directed exclusively at the Ethiopian worker and his flaws, personal attributes, and ways of thinking. The Ethiopian labourer was seen as bearing the sole responsibility for productivity, or unproductivity for that matter. Transferring all such responsibility onto the shoulders of the local work force was also convenient for Chinese management; low productivity could then be solved by using disciplinary methods. Labour discipline, in other words, was commonly cast in moral terms. The worker was expected to take initiative, to take risks, and to act on his own behalf to achieve optimal outcomes. These same ideas are widespread in present-day China, where market reforms have created a paradox in which the pursuit of private initiatives, private interests, and profit coexist with state-imposed limits on individual expression (Ong and Li 2008). Privatisation, promoted with slogans such as 'to be rich is glorious' ('*fuyu guangrong*'), was a deliberate shift in governing strategy to set Chinese citizens free to become 'entrepreneurs of the self' (ibid.: 2). Self-interest and self-promotion were held to go hand-in-hand with the improvement of personal attributes, such as *suzhi* and self-discipline. 'Techniques of the self configure a life worth living, putting into practice values that define a

particular moral order' (ibid.: 16). Economic growth and prosperity could only be sustained by the constant advancement of the self. As such, individual responsibility has become a collective or national responsibility.

Not surprisingly, these ideas were transported to Africa, where Chinese management pointed to the collective benefits of the road and the duty of workers to contribute to economic development. Working hard was seen as a moral obligation vis-à-vis the community. By pointing fingers at underdeveloped agriculture and industries in Ethiopia, Chinese managers legitimised their efforts at trying to change the behaviour of workers and introducing what the managers saw as a 'modern' approach to labour organisation. The consequent failure of Ethiopia to develop was linked to the failure of Ethiopian men – Ethiopian women, who bore the brunt of the tough labour, carrying water and firewood over great distances, were seen as examples of hard workers. What the Chinese perceived as grave gender inequality was, for them, another sign of Ethiopian backwardness, and was pitted against a modern, 'gender-equal' China. Regardless of managerial perceptions, high-minded ideas about transforming the Ethiopian worker failed to materialize, in part because Chinese managers lacked the means and the authority to take effective disciplinary measures. The one place they did succeed, despite complaints from the ERA and Ethiopian consultant engineers, was in implementing a seven-day work week. Management, though, did fail at enforcing an early start to the work day. (The change was successful insofar as it altered meal patterns of Tigrayan workers, but failed with respect to ensuring that the workers would do overtime.) In their naïve yet firm conviction that productivity could and should be enhanced by labour discipline, the Chinese also crossed legal boundaries. For that, they were called on the carpet, as I show in the next two chapters.

4.4 Upholding the us/them dualism

> My wife does not like me being here; of course she does not like it! Living in two different places. She often calls me asking when I [will] come back. But if I go back I will definitely return [to Africa]. But her way of thinking is different from mine. I got used to my life here and my buddies (*huoban*), I mean my Ethiopian workers. I have meanwhile gained affection for them (*chansheng ganqing*), because we have been together for a long time. I understand their mood and natural dispositions (*piqi bingxing*). And I understand their customs (*shenghuo xiguan*). In fact, they are very hardworking (*qinlao*), very hardworking. On the condition that we understand each other, they support our work. Especially him [pointing at one of the workers, sitting on a stool a few metres away, listening silently to the interview]. I brought him here from Dessie [Amhara regional state]. He always listens to me. Although he is a bit stupid (*ta de tounao ben yi dian*), it doesn't matter. It is all about the work. You have to be thorough. If he has things he does not understand, he can learn slowly (*man man xue*). It is the language. At first we couldn't communicate. But after a while, we can understand each other. I only have to give directions with my right hand, and he already understands. (Huang De, 18 June 2012)

The ease with which repairman Huang De of RCE interacted with Ethiopian workers differed from that of his colleagues who were fresh from university, yet his words still reveal a certain cultural relativism – Huang effectively refutes the judgements of fellow Chinese by explaining that his workers are industrious (*qinlao*) in their own way. Even so, a moment later, he is affirming the classic dualism just discussed. With the expression '*ta de tounao ben yi dian*' (literally: 'His brains are a bit stupid'), Huang's implied avoidance of value judgements, the willingness to perceive Ethiopians workers in their own right, is negated. Huang's rhetoric is also revealing in another respect. By maintaining the us/them dualism, management attempted to remain aloof from its Ethiopian work force. Labourers were often referred to as 'stupid' ('*ben*'), especially by the older generation of Chinese migrants to which Huang De belonged. These statements were made without reservation. In other words, Chinese migrants lacked a certain political correctness that colonial consciousness has produced in Western thinking and in talking about Africa and Africans. The ambiguous attitude of Huang De was common among those, especially lower-level managers and on-site foremen, who were on relatively close terms with local labourers. Managers, who sometimes developed close bonds with Ethiopians, also sought to maintain the absolute distinction between themselves and the other. This tension can be heard in Huang's paternalistic tone

(e.g. ‘I brought him here from Dessie’; ‘He always listens to me’), which is reminiscent of past colonial discourses and which reinforces a sense of other-control (Fabian 2000: 7).

Huang’s notion of his relationship to Ethiopia, however, was coloured by notions of generosity. Albeit a higher salary was the main reason for his move to the country in 2010 – he intended to buy a flat for his adult son – he insisted that he also wanted to ‘give something to Africa’ by transferring his expertise of generators, in particular. ‘Africa is quite backward (*luohou*). The technology here is inferior (*cha*)’. The 48-year-old repairman was one of the few Chinese I met who raised the topic of knowledge transfer, which was generally not perceived as a moral duty (contrary to Euro-American ideas on foreign activities in Africa). Huang De grew up in Heihe, close to Russia, where he was involved in the border trade before he moved from the very north to the very south of China, Hainan. One of four sons of workers on a large state farm that cultivated soybeans and wheat, Huang finished school and began working in a factory that made machinery for the agricultural sector. After he moved to Hainan in his early thirties, Huang met his present wife, who comes from the same province. The couple had a son and daughter – the former works in Hainan, the second attends school in Anda, Heilongjiang. Despite the strong ultraviolet rays of the African sun – ‘people my age are already old fellows (*laotou*)’ – Huang could imagine himself working in Ethiopia until retirement. Huang’s gesture of knowledge transfer was noble, yet, at the same time, he benefitted from his exclusive access to professional knowledge and expertise, and attempted to retain this position.

Huang De’s statement about his Ethiopian workers being a bit stupid and slow is reminiscent of the tone of voice with which urban residents addressed peasant workers back home. Huang’s views, then, echo post-reform China’s dualism between established urbanites and rural newcomers. This type of us/them dualism derives from the desire of one group to distinguish itself from the other, as its own position is precarious (the Chinese in Tigray

constituted a small minority), or threatened (by the influx of rural migrants). Chinese in Ethiopia struggled to hold on to their standards, in particular those related to work attitude and labour discipline, and to put forward their ideas. The us/them dualism (e.g. smart versus stupid, fast versus slow, culture versus lack of culture) was essential to justifying disparities in wage scales, allowances, and social wages, in promotion opportunities, free-time arrangements, and access to professional knowledge. By positioning themselves as teachers with exclusive knowledge about modernity and development, Chinese lower- and middle-level managers tried to justify their actions, establish their authority, and advance their principles. As I will show in the next chapter, this attempt was met with active resistance by local workers.

5. *In*disciplining Labourers

On an afternoon in September, Guo Yunli and I met for an interview at Kaldi's Coffee in Bole Medhane Alem, Addis Ababa. We both ordered a cappuccino. Guo instructed his driver to wait for his call when we were finished. After the interview, we ordered a green tea – the drink had appeared on the menu because of the growing number of Chinese attending the coffee house chain – and papaya juice. When we were about to settle the bill, the waitress returned to set another bill on our table. 'From the gentleman outside', she said, pointing at the terrace. When she noticed our confusion, she clarified: 'From your driver', she said and walked away. Guo's driver, who was chatting with a friend out on the terrace, had ordered himself a macchiato and a black forest cake for ETB 19.50.[40] Guo was startled. After paying both bills he walked over to his driver, stammering that he would talk with his boss about this, and saying to me under his breath: 'They are all like this'. After this incident, which took place in the first month of my research, I began to recognise the power of Ethiopian

[40] This sum represented more than half his daily salary of ETB 30.

employees vis-à-vis their expatriate employers. Guo's driver had effectively forced his superior to break protocol and act according to *his* wishes. As it turned out, this incident was illustrative of relations between Ethiopian workers and Chinese managers, in which the former provoked and challenged the authority of the latter. Provocations like these were relatively easy to incite, as Ethiopian subordinates were familiar with the environment, in contrast to their foreign managers. Note that the Ethiopian waitress had played along with the driver's game.

In this chapter I explore management-labour relations by examining other such telling incidents. By offering insight into power dynamics between expatriate management and Ethiopian labourers, these events function as what Abu-Lughod (1990) has termed 'diagnostics of power'. They indicate that power – both dominant *and* defiant power – is at play. My focus is on the disciplinary methods used by Chinese management to fashion labourers into compliant and diligent working bodies, as well as workers' *responses* to these coercive methods. I approach power in management-labour relations as dialectic and processual (Ortner 1995) and try to go beyond binary categories, such as dominance/resistance and hegemony/counter-hegemony (Mbembe 1992: 1), which are often used to describe power. In the case of the road project, management and labour were utterly co-dependent. Although the former controlled the means of production, they were foreign to local practices, which necessitated their heavy reliance on the cooperation of locals for access to labour, resources, and political channels. Expatriate management and workers were in constant dialogue – or engaged in a power struggle – in which it was unclear who was disciplining whom, or who was subordinate to whom. For one thing, roles were subject to constant change. The enforcement of labour discipline on the construction site was often based on personal whim: rules were arbitrarily made up on the spot and disciplinary measures depended on the mood and the goodwill of individual foremen. Over time, the lack of clear-

cut regulations and consistency regarding enforcement resulted in Chinese superiors gradually losing credibility. Efforts to discipline labourers frequently proved counterproductive and led to more or less subtle defiance of order and discipline. Indeed, Ethiopian workers became quite skilled at resisting managerial caprice, so much so that, at times, they were able to 'discipline' their expatriate employers and to advance their employment conditions.

Local discontent with expatriate management was often explicit and voiced openly. What Scott (1990) termed the 'hidden transcript' (the discourse of subordinates that takes place offstage) was less hidden. In the context of south-eastern Tigray the hidden transcript and the public transcript (open interaction between the dominant and the dominated) seemed to merge, partly because the gravity of the criticism got lost in translation due to the language barrier, but, more importantly, because management lacked the (political) authority to suppress defiance and subdue critique. The vignette of Guo Yunli and his driver shows that Chinese managers were subject to ridicule, even in public. Most provocations of workers, however, took place on-site, ranging from subtle transgressions of company rules and regulations to organised actions, such as labour strikes and work stoppages. Subtle transgressions of managerial authority (charging one's macchiato to the boss) were largely symbolic in nature, whereas less subtle, mostly collective, acts were aimed explicitly at improving labour conditions. Labour actions varied significantly in size, form, and content. Although acts like the one in Kaldi's Coffee occurred on a regular basis, they often caught management by surprise. Given their firm belief in the philanthropic nature of their enterprise, Chinese remained puzzled about what they saw as rank ingratitude on the part of Ethiopians.

5.1 Enforcing discipline on the building site

Chinese management regarded African labour with a substantial degree of suspicion. Ethiopian workers only work when compelled to do so, Chinese foremen argued: 'As soon as you look away, they stop working'. Only under managerial supervision would labourers work and refrain from shirking, management stated. Surveillance was therefore the first and foremost disciplinary method exercised by Chinese employers. Management, though, proved unsuccessful in achieving surveillance in the Foucauldian sense of the term, that is, in transferring managerial power (or labour discipline) onto the worker's body (Foucault 1991 [1977]). Employers opted for a hands-on approach, by insisting that their foremen remain on-site. Not only did superiors did not permit Chinese foreman to leave the construction site to which they had been assigned that day, Ethiopians were given little responsibility unless they had both proven expertise in certain trades (e.g. masonry or surveying) and unconditional loyalty to Chinese management.

When mere monitoring proved ineffective, Chinese managers would raise their voices, or even shout, at workers. Associating labour discipline with speed, labourers were summoned with '*tolo, tolo*!' ('Fast, fast!'). Language barriers combined with the sheer volume of noise on building sites to reduce communication to one-word exclamations, such as: '*Mäkina*!' ('Car!'); '*Wäha*!' ('Water!'); 'Give!' or '*Give le*!' (The Mandarin word 'le' was used in this case as a modal particle to intensify the preceding word); 'Come' or '*Come le*'; '*Jazo*!' ('Bring!'); '*Gäbbäň*?' ('Understood?'); and '*Ahun*!' ('Now!'). Conversations between Chinese foremen and Ethiopian labourers were thus short and sharp. Sentences in creole were commonly made up of one of the aforementioned verbs preceded by a simple noun, such as: '*Cemento give le*!' ('Give me the cement!'), '*Mäkina go*!' ('Go by car!'), '*Akafa jazo*!' ('Bring me the spade!'), '*Mister Liu, me come*!' ('Mister Liu, I am coming'), '*Money give le*!' and so forth. Articles (a, an, the) were excised from sentence structures, as

were adverbs and adjectives, any of which would have helped to nuance speech and make the requests more reasonable, if not more polite. It was inevitable, then, that miscommunication abounded.

In cases of outright disobedience, shirking, or theft, Chinese used salary deduction as a means of discipline. Penalties, commonly not exceeding ETB 200, were deducted from monthly wages. By contrast, regular fines were uncommon. Management had learned from experience that Ethiopians had few savings; they did not have the money – or said they did not – to pay fines. Salary deductions provoked quarrelling on pay day, as they often came unannounced. In fact, the lack of (comprehensible) communication between worker and foremen meant that the Ethiopians were often unaware of the fact they had been punished. The first they would discover such was when counting their bank notes on pay day. Naturally, any shortfall was upsetting. At the asphalt plant accountant Gu Diemeng – sometimes in consultation with Liu Deye – decided on the amount of money that would be added to, or deducted from, monthly salaries, a decision mainly based on personal whim. There were no standard or project-wide rules regarding salary deduction.

A more stringent yet frequently applied method of punishment was dismissal. The gate theft in August 2012, for instance, resulted in the dismissal of two of the three security men who had been in service the night of the theft. Both guards had been employed by Golden Roads for less than a month. One man was instructed to keep an eye on the diesel station in the shed next to the asphalt plant, the other to watch the bitumen drums in the surrounding area. After the theft, at first the guards were left alone, even when the Mehoni police stopped by the compound for the investigation. The guard who had disappeared at the time of the theft was sitting silently on a heap at the back end of the plant site – his Kalashnikov on his lap, next to him his cell phone playing traditional Tigrayan music. The other man was strolling around the plant site. Meanwhile, the Chinese crew was debating

with representatives of the project department how next to proceed. Two new guards recruited by Worku were installed the next morning, when the two security men were finally called to the office.

The men walked in quietly. Gu Diemeng asked them to sign a termination of contract statement and handed over the outstanding salary. She gesticulated for the men to count the money, and see if the amount was correct. The men counted the days on their time sheets and discovered that the sum she had given them was short ETB 100. They complained to Worku. Gu Diemeng, it turned out, had deducted ETB 100 from each man's wages. 'If something gets stolen the first time, we deduct 50 ETB from the guard's salary', she explained to me, 'if a second object gets stolen, we deduct 100 ETB; with a third object 150 ETB. I could have deducted even more. One drum costs 100 ETB'. Worku bargained with Gu to reduce the salary deduction to ETB 50 per person, warning that the men might turn around and go to court. But Gu persisted: 'Okay, *ahun* money. No okay, police go. *Ahun, go le*!' ('If you think it is okay, take your money. If you do not think it is okay, then go to the police. Now, go!') The two walked out of the office empty-handed and visibly upset, to be greeted soon after by the surly dogs. The security men wandered around the asphalt plant for a while before finally leaving the premises. The next morning, at half past nine, they returned to pick up the outstanding salary.

It should be noted that, despite having never signed proper employment contracts to begin with, Ethiopian employees of Golden Roads were asked to put their signature to a termination of contract statement upon withdrawal or dismissal. The statement (in Mandarin and English) was drawn up by the project department in an attempt to formalise employment procedures and to protect Chinese subcontracting companies in the local courts. After signing the statement, workers could no longer claim outstanding salaries, compensation of any sort, or severance payments. The statement read as follows:

> I,the undersigned,worked in [company name] as ..... . But now I want to terminate my contract of employment on my own will.I have received my salary,severance pay,all the other payment and certificate.I have no any employment relation with [company name] from today.[41]

Ethiopian employees did not understand either of the two languages; for that matter, neither did the foreman, Worku, who acted as the men's interpreter. Workers were often unaware of the fact that they had ended their employment relation with Golden Roads after signing this piece of paper with their name and fingerprint. Only the contractor, by way of setting an example, drew up employment contracts following the provisions laid out in the Ethiopian Labour Proclamation (The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 42/1993 and 377/2003). Even so, good practices failed to trickle down, or trickled down rather slowly. Subcontractors like Golden Roads, Wuhe, and Qimo, which hired mostly local workers, would have benefitted most from improved administrative procedures. RCE employed Alex[42] from Inner Mongolia, who had received an undergraduate degree in business English, to deal with legal matters. Below is an example of a notice of dismissal drawn up by him.[43]

> **[Company name]**
>
> Ref. No. [company name]/ (E) 05/2012
> Date: 2012-1-15
>
> To: Desalean Dawit
>
> Sub: Termination of Contract of Employment
>
> It is recalled that you have been employed as a driver in this office from Nov-26-2010. Now you are kindly to informed that since you had seriously accident you drive the Nissan vehicle Plate No. 45571 without any permission even drink alcohol during his driving and carry some people who not belong to the company and make the company vehicle badly damaged, meanwhile, you still lost one Nissan spare tyre and one jack, this office has decided to terminate the Contract of Employment between you and the Company based on (c), (g), (h), (j) Sub-Article (1) of Article 27 of Labour Proclamation No. 377/2003 (as amended).
>
> This termination is effective as of Jan-15-2012. Please report as soon as possible to the Administration Office for your final payoff and go through other procedures. If you fail to come to collect this letter, it shall be posted on the notice board of the Company. Furthermore, because your own problem make the company vehicle damaged seriously and lost other

[41] Punctuation and spelling are reproduced as they were in the original statement.
[42] Alex insisted I call him by his English name (here, however, a pseudonym).
[43] Lay-out and spelling are in original.

above mentioned property, The Company hereby will request and accuse you to compensate the loss you made to the company and punished by the local law.

[signed]

Head of the Administrative Office
Alamata-Moheni-Hiwane Road Upgrading Project

These statements of the contractor were, if necessary, translated by Selam Mihret, who worked in Alex's office and helped with interpreting, translating, and dealing with legal cases.

A number of changes to the administrative procedures of Chinese subcontracting companies like Golden Roads were eventually put forward in response to the mounting funds lost in court and pressure exerted by town administrations. The form below was drawn up by the project department in an attempt to standardise methods of penalising Ethiopian labourers and to protect subcontractors in court. When filled out and signed by the respective parties, the document counted as legal evidence. By law, a worker could only be dismissed when the employer was able to prove that the worker had violated regulations three times, and so three signed 'Warning, Penal Sum, Termination Information' [sic] forms were required as evidence. Copies of the form were distributed by RCE to all subcontractors. However, advanced administrative procedures were not always implemented as intended. The asphalt plant crew had drawn a lesson from their experience in court, albeit the wrong lesson. After a lawsuit following a strike in February 2012 (discussed in the next chapter), Golden Roads made new employees sign three copies of the form before their employment would begin. Should the workers then decide to sue their Chinese employer, the signed forms could be used against them.

警告、罚款、解雇通知单[44]
Warning, Penal sum, Termination Information

日期：
Date:

一、 雇员基本情况：
Circis of Employee:

姓名：
Name:

工号：
No:

工种：
Occupation:

工段：
Site:

日工资：
Daily salary:

二、 违反劳动纪律条款，在序号前划 “√”
Disobey The Labor Discipline Item, Write “√” Before NO.

01、 迟到 早退
Lateness Leave early
02、 工作时间睡觉、闲谈。
Work time sleeping, chat about.
03、 无故或不经允许缺勤。
No cause or absence from duty without admission.
04、 工作时间离开工作岗位华工作地点。
Leaving the work post or work the location during work time.
05、 怠慢工作。
Neglect the work.
06、 不服从工作班次或工作时间安排。
Disobedience work number or work time arrangement.
07、 不遵守工长指令。
Do not obey the foreman.
08、 在工作时间、地点与工长争吵，或指责、辱骂甚至侮辱、伤害工长。
Quarrelling, blame, insult, humiliate or beating foreman at work time, work place.
09、 不正确使用交其使用的工具、仪器、设备。
Inaccuracy uses the tool, instrument, equipments which the foreman hands over.
10、 在工作中有欺诈行为。
Cheating in work.
11、 盗窃雇主的财产或资金。
Steal the properties or fund of employer.
12、 因为雇员的行为或疏忽，对雇主或与雇主有联系的一方的财产造成损害。

[44] Spelling, grammar, and punctuation are in the original (including mistakes).

Properties of employer or have connection with employer been damaged because of in the mood for behavior or negligence.

13、 在工作地点故意进行危害生命或财产安全的行为。
The behavior of endangering life or properties intentionally at work place.

14、 在雇主人身或财务受到威胁或伤害时，拒绝给予帮助。
Refuse give help when employer Human body or properties suffer threat or disservices.

15、 当法律或雇主因为善意的原因要求体检时，拒绝体检。
Be law or employers request to be check-up because the good faith reason, refuse it.

16、 拒绝遵守安全，意外防护规定和采取必要的安全防范措施。
Refuse to obey safety, accident protection and adopt the necessary safety measure.

17、 工作时间喝酒或酒后工作。
Drinking at work time or working after the wine.

18、 因身体壮况不能坚持正常出勤和工作。
He/She can't insist normal on duty with work because of the body condition.

19、 组织或参与非法罢工。
Organizes or participate the illegal strike.

20、 其他理由
Other Reason _____

三、 处理办法，只填适用空格并在序号前划 "√"
Handle way, Fill the suitable for use blank space and Write "√" Before S/N.

1、 你被正式提出警告。
You were put forward the warning formally.

2、 罚款_____天工资，数额为_____。
Penal sum _____days salary/D, Amount _____.

3、 你被降低工资_____。
You were lowered the salary _____.

4、 从即日起你被停工 _____ 天，无工资。
From this day you are stopped work for _____ days, withouth the salary.

5、 从即日起你被解雇。
From this day you are fired.

四、 劳动工具、仪器及其它物品归还情况，如未归还，建议扣款数额为_____。
The circumstance of returning Labor tool, instrument and other products, if have no to return, suggest to deduct the salaray _____ Birr.

中方工长签字 日期
Signature by foreman:_____ Date: _____

雇员签字 日期
Signature by employee: _____Date: _____

人事部签字 日期
Signature by Ministry of Personnel: _____ Date: _____

This original document, which included a translation in Tigrinya (taken from the English version), is an example of how misunderstandings might come about. 'Neglect the work' (Article 5) was surely not an exhortation, but a warning. The same is true for 'do not obey the foreman' (Article 6). And workers were not to take up work after consuming wine (a pricey beverage that was rarely consumed by labourers) alone. The lofty title 'Ministry of Personnel' was also misleading – the 'ministry' was the human resources office.

The document offers insight not only into the rules and regulations in regard to labour discipline but also into the prevailing forms of labour *in*discipline. Arriving late at work and leaving early, or without permission, were the most frequent forms of defiance. Dozing or chatting between tasks, or while waiting for equipment or construction materials to arrive, was common practice, as was staying away from work. Reflecting a rather hierarchical labour organisation, the form shows that Chinese employers commanded absolute submission to the foreman's orders (articles 3, 7 and 8). The document also mirrors the importance Chinese managers attached to the order of tasks in the labour process (*gongzuo banci*) (work order of tasks) and work time schedule (*gongzuo shijian anpai*) (see articles 1 and 6). Labourers liked to thwart the time schedule of Chinese managers as a form of transgression. This practice became so common that foremen were forced to give their workers leeway. A number of articles were included to protect the employer's properties (articles 9, 11, 12, and 13). Chinese managers were commonly of the opinion that equipment and machinery was not safe in the hands of Africans; indeed, the safety of property was emphasised over the safety of human beings (articles 13 and 14). Of the disciplinary methods mentioned, salary deduction was most common. (Workers who were suspended were likely to stay away and never return.) Deductions also served the employers' interests, as the Chinese lacked the authority and the means to force workers to pay compensation for lost or damaged items.

5.2 Disciplining Chinese colleagues

Chinese management's attempt to retain law and order, as I have demonstrated, was directed not just at the Ethiopian work force, but also at members of the Chinese community. In order to protect the image of the educated, disciplined, and diligent Chinese engineer, the project management tried to control and coach the lower segments of the Chinese migrant community, or what Qimo's manager called the 'trash' ('*laji*'): the needy and uneducated, those with a darker skin, a rougher character, a lack of *wenhua*, and a lower *suzhi* (cf. Stoler 2009; 1997; 1989). Management did so by implementing and enforcing a quasi-legal system that stood separate from its Tigrayan counterpart, a system created specifically for disciplining Chinese.

As per notice from the project department, which had been announced to all subcontractors in September 2011, Chinese who were found drinking during work time, or who 'caused incidents' ('*nao shi*') after having consumed alcohol outside work hours, would be fined ETB 500 to 1,000 and summoned to the 'local judicial authorities' ('*dangdi sifa jiguan*'). Management supposedly realised that this threat would be effective. If and when the person in question were caught a second time, he or she would receive a penalty of ETB 1,000 up to 2,000 and would be required to step down from work for one full week. When a Chinese was caught drinking or 'stirring up emotions and acting illegally' ('*ruo chu fan falü*') after consuming alcohol a third time, he or she would not receive the previous month's salary and would be sent back to China. By contrast, an Ethiopian worker caught drinking during work time was either neglected, served with a warning, or could expect a day's wage deducted from his salary. The discrepancy is striking, and for good reason. Discipline and punishment of Chinese workers turned out to be much more effective than that directed at Ethiopian workers, not necessarily because punishments were more stringent, but because project management exerted a higher degree of authority over its expatriate employees. That

authority underscored workers' utter dependence on the company they worked for. As principal care-taker abroad, the employer's power must not be underestimated, not least as most migrants had never left China before migrating to Africa.

The relationship between company (management) and Chinese employees was characterised by a deep-rooted paternalism that took several forms. Some respondents, for instance, maintained that the company fostered the notion that it would take care of and protect its employees. (In reality, though, Chinese staff members argued, the company was unable to execute this role.) Certainly the practice of controlling its employees served to increase the dependency level of employees on their superiors with respect to mobility and worker autonomy in general. For example, personal identification documents, including passports, were handed over to the contractor's head office right after arrival in Ethiopia, to be repossessed again just prior to the employee's flight out. By retaining passports and work permits, the contractor raised the stakes on the job: employers could threaten workers with firing them and sending them back to China, as well as simply switching their employers. Holding on to passports was also an effective means of keeping defiant employees in check, especially those at the bottom of the community hierarchy.

The project manager, I noticed, carried his travel documents with him, but when I asked Chinese employees of RCE why they did not carry their own documents, they told me the following tale. In the past there had been a Chinese who had come from another African country and who was travelling via Addis Ababa back to China. When customs caught the man with ivory in his suitcase, he was sent to jail. He spent seven years in an Ethiopian prison without anyone else's knowledge – neither the company's, nor his family members – where he ultimately died. Needless to say, such a story would strike fear; incidentally, this is precisely the response that would serve the company's interest. Retaining control over passports and resident permits allowed the company to maintain the notion that it would 'care'

for its employees, were something bad to happen. In practice, document retention meant the company could also regulate (and curtail) employees' movements.

In fact, the project management attempted to control not only the mobility but also the behaviour of Chinese employees, contractor and subcontractor alike, to restore the reputation of the Chinese in south-eastern Tigray and to maintain the us-and-them boundaries that kept management and managed in their proper places on the labour ladder. On 11 June 2011 the asphalt plant crew received a letter from the project department, containing the following:

> On 10 June 2011, two o'clock, one of the project department's technical staff members visited [Golden Roads] asphalt plant to check the state of the plant facilities and discovered that only the head of station [Liu Deye] was at work at the plant. Of the rest of the staff members some were playing card games, others were sleeping. The mineral powder vehicle was standing in the compound, as well as the dump trucks, of which 12 were standing in the compound. They must have been standing there for at least three days. At present we are in the best period of the year to carry out building work, prior to the rainy season. All the subcontractors on the project are working very hard (*nuli dagan*), only [this company's] attitude is negative (*taidu xiaoji*). You do not show the discipline (*wu zuzhi jilüxing*) in tackling the above mentioned situation. After investigation, the project manager has decided to fine [Golden Roads] 10,000 ETB, at the same time the company shall bear the costs of the idle trucks.

According to Lian Du and Du Tianfu, the project manager had contacted the general manager of Golden Roads in Dalian, who, in turn, decided to deduct USD 1,000 from the salaries of all staff members, excepting Liu Deye's. For most team members this penalty was 120 per cent of their monthly salary, a tactic on the part of the employer that would be impossible in China, Lian and Du agreed, at least legally. Even so, the punishment proved effective. It was February of the following year before the crew dared bring out the cards again. The punishment meted out by Golden Road's general manager made disciplining look as if it were based on personal whim, much as it was when punishment was levied at the Ethiopians. However, that was not the case. Whereas the company manager decided to dock wages merely to fill his pockets, the penalty of RCE's project department was part of the 'civilising mission' to sanitize the image of the Chinese, who should not be seen lazing about the compound.

5.3 *In*discipline on the building site

Chinese employees might have been effectively restrained by punitive measures but the Ethiopians were not. Indeed, their responses to management's attempts to rein them in showed both creativity and gumption. Subversive acts ranged from subtle transgressions of company rules and regulations to collective acts, such as slow- and sit-down actions and labour strikes. Whereas subtle transgressions were chiefly evocative and did not directly challenge managerial authority, actions such as slow- and sit-downs and strikes were specifically aimed at defying expatriate management and pressing for improvement of labour conditions – in most cases, higher wages. More or less subtle acts of defiance could originate with individuals or collectives. Regardless, publicly contradicting the basis of the Chinese manager's claim to expertise and authority meant that even subtle transgressions were not entirely innocent. Instances of open defiance that go unanswered often lead to further acts of daring (Scott 1990: 19). Certainly in this case, an accumulation of subversive acts did put managerial authority in question, even if only on a symbolic level.

Subtle transgressions included deliberately slowing down the pace of work, delivering a poor job, speaking up or laughing loudly, chatting with friends, leaving the construction site without permission, chewing *chat*, or just walking around with *chat*. Some drivers deliberately left *chat* in see-through bags on the dashboard or next to the gear lever, or placed beer bottles in side-door cases. Subversive acts of the drivers alone included speeding, playing loud music, singing, or tapping on the steering wheel to the unique beat of Tigrayan traditional music. Ethiopian labourers also liked to trespass on the comfort zones of their Chinese foremen, for instance, by resting a hand or an arm on his shoulder, or leaning against him – an act that signified companionship among Ethiopians of equal status and seniority, but which was disliked by Chinese, who saw the gesture as a sign of laziness. Or labourers

fumbled with the foreman's work outfit, or the cell phone cover attached to his belt, pretending to steal the device. This playful behaviour, to which Chinese foremen (pretended they) did not take offence, is reminiscent of what Radcliffe-Brown (1940) has characterised as joking relationships, especially between kin or affines. The interaction between Chinese foremen and Ethiopian labourers reflected the 'peculiar combination of friendliness and antagonism' (ibid.: 196) typical of joking relationships. However, this dynamic appeared to originate from a distinction in ethnicity, possibly in addition to a language barrier (which made communicating very basic and at times uneasy), rather than a difference in seniority per se. Such playful behaviour commonly caused laughter, but it could just as easily result in tension when boundaries were breached.

The above-mentioned modes of transgressions of company rules and regulations were chiefly individual acts. Subtle transgressions could, however, be undertaken by small collectives. One morning when rain started pouring down, labourers on the building site of the Addis Ababa Ring Road Project gathered under the tiers of the Tinishu Akaki Bridge, which was under construction. The workers formed a large circle and started performing traditional dances, while singing, clapping, and laughing, elated at the break from work. The Chinese foremen, meanwhile, were hiding from the rain in the cabin of an Isuzu. Expressive activities such as singing, drumming, dancing, and laughing – which Chinese managers ascribed to the emotional and exuberant character of the African – were seen as signs of a lack of dedication or commitment to work. And yet these also translated into acts of defiance. The performance described above, for instance, is reminiscent of the grotesque and theatrical forms of resistance, which Mbembe (1992, inspired by Bakhtin 1984[1968]), locates in the African postcolony. That rainy morning, everyone on-site knew exactly what was being enacted – the Ethiopian road workers were expressing their joy not only in singing and dancing but also in subverting Chinese labour discipline.

Many subversive acts contained a strong visual element, such as the *chat* placed next to the gear lever, or the beer bottles in the door-case. Another visual and largely symbolic act of transgression was the decoration of company vehicles. Ethiopian workers attached stickers to car windows, and painted slogans – often love-themed, such as 'Love is God' or 'Love wins' (see figure 6) – in white paint on the dump trucks of Duyin Enterprise. Workers were also fond of philosophical quotes like 'Time is Glass'. Car beautification was a popular practice in Ethiopia. Drivers who possessed their own (or a friend's or a kin's) car or minibus, or who drove a rented vehicle for long periods of time, typically invested time and money on prettifying the in- and outside of their vehicles, draping dashboards with pink, green, red, or yellow velvet, and covering cabin ceilings with colourful cloth and fringes, flowers, and other kitsch. Posters of the Virgin Mary or scantily clad Britneys or Madonnas were often displayed above bunk beds at the back of cabins. Wooden crosses or plastic items, such as eagles or lions, hung from rear-view mirrors, swinging back and forth anytime the vehicle was in motion. One time I spotted a Chinese lantern hung this way. Gosa Samuel, who had been hired (with truck) by one of the project's Ethiopian subcontractors, told me that he had spent ETB 1,100 on the decoration of his truck.

The truck cabin was typically a space appropriated through what De Certeau (1988 [1984]: xiv) termed 'ways of operating' – innumerable quotidian practices by means of which users or consumers (re)appropriate space created by more dominant others. The cabin was not only home to the controls; it was a place that served the worker's needs and interests, be they shirking, napping, resting, gathering with friends, chatting, or chewing *chat* – all subversive acts when performed during work hours. Moreover, albeit the Chinese built the road and owned the vehicles, it was the Ethiopian drivers who took advantage of the mobility afforded by the road and company vehicles. The driver, after all, was in the driver's seat, meaning that

Ethiopian drivers exercised control by using the car or truck for their own means, at least within whatever range of freedom they were allotted.

Although decorations inside vehicles were largely meant to satisfy the driver, decorations outside (e.g. on windows and car doors) appeared to be visual statements aimed at teasing, and at testing the authority of the vehicle's Chinese owner. The beautification of company vehicles was one way of appropriating things that were not one's own. The words and slogans in Amharic or Tigrinya effectively masked Chinese ownership of the vehicles. Two weeks after the funeral of Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, He Shengli, the vehicle and personnel manager of RCE, lost his patience. Nicknamed 'doctor' ('*daifu*'), as the surly yet sympathetic middle-aged man had worked in a Shanghai hospital before going to Ethiopia in search of peace (*qingjing*) after a burn-out, he tore off all posters and stickers featuring the deceased politician from the windscreens, mirrors, and rear windows of the company cars.

In addition to playing with visual signification, Ethiopian workers also manipulated language to subvert Chinese authority (cf. Wedeen 1999; Gal 1993; Fabian 1986). Just as the word *alibaba* was used pejoratively by Chinese and appropriated by Ethiopians to cast the other in a negative light, another colloquial concept subject to such manipulation was *madamu*. A word with origins in either the English or the Russian word 'madam' (those who brought it up did not agree on its origin), *madamu* could be used to address females. Said, however, with a certain intonation, the word suggested 'lady of pleasure'. Both Ethiopians and Chinese rarely used the word among members of their own ethnic group. *Madamu* only gained currency in the pidgin language that developed from interactions between Chinese and Ethiopians. Being called *madamu* was not a complement. It was an outright denigration. Chinese called local women *madamu*, especially those who took liberties with (Chinese) men.

In turn, Ethiopians used the word to address their female Chinese superiors as a mode of defiance.

Joking was another subtle and indirect form of subversion. Jokes, of course, depend on the shared experience of the teller and the audience to be effective (Wedeen 1999: 121). On the road project, jokes commonly circulated *within* one ethnic group and touched upon 'bad characteristics' of the other. Ethnic jokes, in other words, were discursive methods that functioned as cultural critique or commentary (Constable 1997: 12). Constable demonstrates, in the context of Filipina domestic workers and their Chinese employers, that jokers are asserting their ability to outwit and claim symbolic superiority over their superiors, even if that is simply for the duration of the joke, and its effect. And, although the content of a joke often appears to reinforce the status quo, the laughter it evokes in public or in the presence of superiors – commonly both subject matter and target of the joke – can be understood as an expression of subtle subversion (ibid. 175-176). In Ethiopia, the language barrier actually made it safe for native workers to exchange jokes about Chinese managers in the presence of the other. The loud and demonstrative laughter which followed jokes led Chinese to guess that they were the topic of discussion, and yet they were oblivious to how. Moreover, they lacked the language to talk back, or level the playing field.

Like rumours, jokes were often predicated upon simple ethnic stereotypes, such as physical characteristics or phenotype, like slit eyes, and cultural traits, such as the consumption of certain foods:

> In Ethiopia we should not drink while driving. In China they should not laugh while driving. (Ethiopian chief surveyor of Indian consultant company, 29 June 2012)
>
> The Chinese eat everything of a pig, except its sound. (Ethiopian material inspector, 22 February 2012)
>
> The Chinese eat everything, except for the airplane in the sky and the ship on the water. (Ethiopian driver of a Chinese company, 13 October 2011)

> What if Adam and Eve were Chinese? They would have eaten the snake instead of the apple. (Ethiopian purchase manager of a Chinese company, 12 September 2011)

A number of food items (that were thought to be) consumed by Chinese were taboo in Ethiopia, including pork, as well as the flesh of dogs, donkeys, ducks, and snakes. In fact, apart from pork and pigs, Chinese largely refrained from eating these animals, aware as they were that Ethiopians rejected such practices. One day the police in Mehoni received a phone call from a local farmer, who claimed he had seen a Chinese engineer eat a particular insect, whereupon he likely would have fallen to the ground and died. The police visited the place where the incident allegedly had taken place to discover that the farmer had phoned in a false tip. Jokes about food that is considered taboo suggests the impurity of the consumer (Douglas 2004 [1966]), as well as his barbarity or 'beastliness'. The riddle about Adam and Eve is a particularly striking metaphor in this respect, with its implied critique of Chinese disrespect for, or ignorance of, the workers' Christianity. Another theme of ethnic jokes was the categorical distinction drawn between *ferenji* (foreigner) and *China* (Chinese).[45]

> A landlady in Addis Ababa is looking for a renter and asks a broker to help her find one. 'I don't care if it is an Ethiopian or a foreigner (*ferenji*), but I don't want Somalis or Sudanese', she says to the broker. Not much later he comes back with a Chinese. The landlady's face grows gloomy when she sees the Chinese. 'What did I say? I want foreigners, not Chinese!' (Ethiopian journalist, 8 October 2011)

This joke speaks to the view of Chinese as fundamentally different from other foreigners (or Westerners). Moreover, it suggests that Chinese are inhuman or 'beasts', as an Ethiopian surveyor pointed out. When I asked why Chinese were regarded as inhuman, Ethiopians referred to Chinese food habits – 'people who eat dog cannot be human' – or the lack of display of emotions. 'They did not even cry when that Chinese lost his life in the car accident in the mountains'. By contrast, the public display of grief was common among Tigrayans, who would gather to mourn the death of a relative or neighbour at the person's home.

[45] The category of *China* was also applied to Japanese and Koreans.

Many subtle acts of transgression were reminiscent of what Scott (1985) referred to as everyday forms of resistance, that is, small-scale and unorganised acts that occurred on a daily basis. But were they weapons of the *weak*? In contrast to the landowners described by Scott, the superiors in this case were outsiders who did not speak the language and who were unfamiliar with local systems of signification and common means of conduct. Chinese employers did possess the means of production, but they were heavily reliant on the road authorities for capital, and on the local community in terms of labour and recourses; in sum, Chinese lacked political power and authority in the region. This power imbalance can be seen in the offensive, rather than defensive, forms of transgression against the Chinese. The dynamic between the expatriate enterprise management and the local work force, and the subversive acts that followed from this interaction, were of a different nature from those described by Scott and other researchers who have studied worker transgression and protest in industrial settings (see, among others, Mills 2005; Pun 2005; Turner 1999; Lee 1998; Ong 1987). Albeit small-scale and largely unorganised, subtle acts of transgression by Ethiopians were more daring and more visible than what Scott described as the 'weapons of the weak'. Moreover, ostensibly innocent subversive acts were paralleled by overt forms of subversion, such as labour stoppages, protests, and strikes, which were directly aimed at improving labour conditions, as we shall see, below.

5.4 Labour protests

Despite being relatively unfamiliar with industrial modes of production, Ethiopian labourers were remarkably successful in their efforts to advance their working lives. Active trade unions or other forms of supportive structures that would have protected workers from managerial caprice and exploitation did not exist in south-eastern Tigray, which meant workers had to take matters into their own hands and, in contrast to the more subtle forms of

transgression, engage in overt work actions, such as labour strikes. This form of defiance was aimed explicitly at improving employment conditions, and was certainly more perilous; but it was also less frequent, because participants would be risking sanctions, such as severe wage deductions or dismissals. In order to minimise (or spread) such risk, labour protests usually involved substantial groups of workers. Other collective forms of defiance such as slow-downs were more common, as they could not easily be sanctioned by management. Skilled employees (e.g. surveyors) who had some work experience with Ethiopian contractors or consultant companies were often those who took the lead in overt forms of transgression. It is important to note that demands for higher wages or better treatment in general sprang from a search for justice and respect, not from financial needs alone. Acts of protest, in other words, were informed by an explicit class consciousness. Low wages were, for labourers, a sign of disrespect and a violation of their dignity; workers did not feel properly rewarded for the labour carried out. The potential gains of work actions were nonetheless carefully calculated, as were the risks involved. Most labourers were conscious of what they could get away with and how far they could go. In fact, Ethiopians were well ahead of the game: acts of protest not only formed but also transformed labour relations between labourers and management, mostly to the advantage of the former.

Labour protests occurred almost every other week at the peak of the construction work in early 2012. Disputes, though, were limited to a single company. (No project-wide protests occurred during or after my field research.) Protests took place chiefly in compounds or on the building site. Seldom were they taken to the streets in settlements. In fact, there appeared to be no urgency to make workers' discontent public, perhaps because in most cases the public was already aware of such discontent. Many members of the local community were connected to labourers through kin or neighbourly networks and proved supportive of their relations and friends. Authorities and ordinary people were aware of the employment

conditions of local workers, not least as the work was carried out in public spaces. Many local residents took an interest in the construction of the new asphalt road crossing their village or town, and building sites were often surrounded by spectators, especially when tarmac was being applied. Another factor was also at play with protests: although they affected only small segments of the labour force, they set an example for other segments. Disputes or strikes often triggered others at different points along the project road to the point that compelling similarities between incidents of worker protest suggested mimicry. Even so, the impact of protests overall was minor and remained local, solely affecting the labour conditions of the company where the dispute occurred.

Why did worker protests remain relatively small-scale and cellular? For one thing, the physical distances between building sites and living zones hampered the ability of workers to gather. As well, the sheer length of the project made information transmission slow and selective, and information was easily lost from one settlement to the next. When a Chinese employee of Jianghe Construction died in a car crash in the mountains, at kilometre 97, just before Chinese New Year in 2012, it took three days for the news to arrive at the asphalt plant at kilometre 52. Different Chinese companies were commissioned to construct different sections of the road, which meant that workplaces also remained local. Moreover, a seven-day long work week and the lack of holidays prevented workers from travelling. Another reason why disputes remained cellular was the sheer number of Chinese companies involved in the project, and the respective disparities in their practices. Each company set its own wage levels and established its own worker policies, engendering a variety of labour conditions that resulted in the lack of a common goal (and employer) to fight against. Labour disputes, then, rarely crossed company borders.

What did involve several companies was voting with the feet, a popular form of labour protest. Workers played Chinese companies against one another by deserting one

company and moving to another for a salary boost. Switching employers was a popular strategy used to improve work conditions and gain rewards; certainly, it increased competition between subcontractors. In the beginning of June 2012, for instance, Wuhe Construction proceeded with ditch work between kilometre 70 and 78 and approached the building site of another subcontractor around kilometre 80. Up until then, there had been a significant distance between the sites and the companies. Workers of Wuhe lived in Mehoni and labourers of the all-Ethiopian company directed by a Chinese lived in a compound near Adiqey. As the labourers worked all day and ate their lunch on-site, there had been little or no contact between them. But as they broached the vicinity of the other, labourers began interacting during work time, including comparing wages and employment conditions. Although salaries did not differ significantly – Wuhe paid workers around ETB 20 per day and labourers from the other company earned ETB 25 per day – workers of the all-Ethiopian company enjoyed additional benefits. When workers performed well, they were offered the opportunity to develop skills in certain specialisations, such as masonry or bar binding. Moreover, the company started work later in the day and finished earlier. Not surprisingly, once Wuhe's labourers learned all this, they staged a strike, demanding an immediate pay rise. If the employer would not hear their demands, they threatened, they would desert Wuhe for the other company. The strike lasted four days, after which almost half of the workforce resigned. Wuhe's Lao Zhao was enraged. The labour protest resulted in a fight between him and the manager of the all-Ethiopian company over salaries of local workers – one accusing the other of failing to keep to the wage levels set by the contractor. In the end, the dispute was resolved with the intervention and mediation of project manager Gu. Lao Zhao, however, had to raise the wages of his workers. Incidents like this show how Chinese employers were gradually forced to adjust wages as the result of multiple labour strikes and disputes, especially in places like Adiqey, where there was a relative shortage of labour.

5.5 The peasant consultant: confrontations with local residents

'They think the road is Chinese!' Gu Hongyang had been fiddling with the sleeve of his jacket, while waiting for his chance to speak up. At some point he decided to interrupt the reporter from Radio Tigray, who was interviewing the resident engineer Melaku Negus about the road project under his supervision. 'The locals use picks to damage the asphalt. They ruin our [culvert] pipes by throwing them down the slope'. The reporters looked confused, as did the resident engineer, who had been speaking placidly about recent progress made by the Chinese contractor. The radio crew from Mekele was standing in the car park in front of the resident engineer's office, where I was going through monthly progress reports; I could follow the interview through the open window next to the filing cabinet. The project manager was talking rather incoherently about the harm done to the Chinese by the local community and workforce. 'Some of the locals are reasonable. Others are not. We [the contractor] listen to the reasonable suggestions. We gave them a median for the town section. They wanted a bicycle lane and even a square with fountain. But that's not in the contract!' Gu Hongyang was using this opportunity to give voice to what he saw as Chinese suffering in the region until the resident engineer, Melaku, managed to interrupt and explain the project manager's message in politically correct terms. Melaku then suggested that they all go and have a look at the actual construction work. Together with the radio crew and the project manager, Melaku Negus left for the site. This incident reveals the despair of the project manager, who evidently saw forms of protest initiated by members of the local community as explicitly targeting the Chinese. He threatened repeatedly 'to de-mobilize', that is, to withdraw the workforce and the machinery from the mountain section.

Chinese management felt they had been backed against a wall in part because defiance came at them from all sides. Not only workers but also local residents who lived or

who farmed plots along the project road were engaged in a collective effort to defy the expatriate employers. Tigrayans who meddled with, or protested against, the construction work were dubbed 'peasant consultants' ('*nongmin jianli*') by the Chinese – 'peasant' indicating the complainant's rural origin and 'consultant' meaning the person in question was espousing some kind of expertise. The phrase was of course a slur. It suggested that locals had no business interfering in road-related issues, which, from the Chinese vantage point, belonged to the domain of the engineer and the engineer alone. Nonetheless, residents' defiance against Chinese employers, the Ethiopian road authorities, or the road in a more abstract sense, was becoming increasingly common – more common than it used to be, a structural inspector asserted.

In March 2012 the owner of Hotel Raya connected the waste pipe of his toilet to the road ditch under construction. The police were called in. A wealthy businessman and an authority in the region, the hotel owner was given a verbal warning by police. The man removed the pipe only to reinstall it two days later. In that respect, the hotelier was not only creative but persistent. He was not alone. Opposition from local residents included: theft of building material, such as steel, masonry stone, and cement; blocking construction work; demanding design revisions; verbal and physical assaults on Chinese supervisory personnel; and incidents like the one of the hotel owner. Acts of defiance by local residents were referred to by company management as '*minfan*' (literally: 'people's revolt'), a word that Chinese might associate, ironically, with the socialist expression, *guanbi minfan* (civil revolt in response to the oppression of officials). In the context of the road project, however, officials were seen as instigating or, worse, initiating acts of sabotage against the Chinese. Rather than supporting corporate hegemony, as the Chinese had envisaged, the local state apparatus supported the local work force.

Popular defiance, or *minfan*, often derived from a struggle over ownership of the road and the materials from which it was built. Consider the following conversation I had with Biniyam Samuel, an engineer who was dispatched by the ERA to settle the handover of the flat section of the project road, in early June 2012.

> BS: When people take away base-course material, it is the responsibility of the client (ERA).
> MD: So you mean the local people are stealing from the Ethiopian Roads Authorities?
> BS: Yes. (…) If the road is destroyed by local people, it is the responsibility of the client.
> MS: But whose road is it?
> BS: Our road. But we build the road for the people. Their quality of living will be improved. The road creates markets. Lives will be changed. Roads attract investment.
> MS: What kind of investment?
> BS: Agro-industries. And we don't know what minerals the mountains in Tigray contain. We may find mines that we can exploit. (Biniyam Samuel, 1 June 2012)

Biniyam Samuel's ideas, particularly his strong belief in the capacity of the road to bring economic growth and prosperity, are illustrative of a technocratic discourse (Melly 2013; Harvey and Knox 2012; Flower 2004; Scott 1998 and others). Notice that Biniyam personifies the road, by contending that it 'creates markets' and 'attracts investment' – parlance characteristic of the manner in which engineers speak about their projects and how they envisage the social effects their artefacts will achieve. What exactly, then, was the ERA's role in the project?

'They are always throwing the ball to us', uttered Geteye Lema, the deputy director of ERA's Design and Build Department. On the fifth floor of an office building between Meskel Square and Mexico Square in central Addis Abeba, a team of young and talented engineers was trying to resolve conflicts and work out disagreements on the construction sites of fourteen road projects (DB-projects only) spread around the country. The engineers did so primarily by letter writing. Sometimes they flew over to talk to the regional government in Mekele, and every two or three months one of them would visit the Ring Road Project site in question. Nonetheless, headquartered in the capital, the ERA remained at a distance. 'We cannot look under the asphalt', once remarked ERA representative, Biniyam Samuel. It was his task to investigate the works and examine if their execution fulfilled the criteria before the

hand-over of the flat section, and he watched with what he called a 'bird's eye of view', admitting that he was not able to check if the base-course under the asphalt were of the right compaction, nor could he see if the elevation of the pipes under the road were correct.

How far the state's reach protruded into any given project or its execution was limited. Even the ERA's efforts to regulate (and smooth) the building process proved of limited success. Upon receiving a complaint, for instance, from the Chinese contractor about the demolition of culvert pipes and newly built outlet structures by local residents, the ERA wrote a letter to Adigudem *woreda* administration to urge for measures. Adigudem wrote back that it had assigned policemen to guard the works, whereupon a new complaint of the Chinese followed, that it had not seen a single policeman on-site at the final section of the road, where they were needed most. Rather than superimposing, or 'enframing' (Mitchell 1988) a road on a region, the State, as embodied by the ERA, was involved constantly in efforts to bind parties and combine interests. The ERA also served as mediator in an area with overwhelming expectations and demands. The ERA had to compromise on its design manual after finding out that the terrain did not fit the design specifications (e.g. with respect to the slope gradients and the curve radii). The ERA would approve realignments as a consequence of local resistance, seemingly irresolvable right-of-way issues, or mistakes made by construction blasters. In fact, from the signing of the contract onwards, the ERA was forced to accommodate local circumstances.

The ideas and ideals of technocrats often fail to find acceptance in local communities; road building, which is frequently met with ambivalence (Harvey 2012), is no exception. On the one hand, roads are received with enthusiasm for their capacity to enchant (Harvey and Knox 2012: 522) and herald modernisation (Flower 2004). On the other hand, roads are seen as a potential threat to the community autarky. João de Pina-Cabral (1987) has demonstrated how the transformation of rural roads into national thoroughfares was opposed by the local

population of Alto Minho, Portugal. The suspicion with which the road building was met could not be explained merely by fear of losing farming fields and houses. The penetration of national roads into rural regions affected long-existing associations that strongly identified with the land. Local protests, then, could be seen as an attempt on the part of the local community to defend the local autarky as 'a cherished tradition of local independence and interdependence' (ibid.: 718). Unlike the closely watched old tracks that had crisscrossed the Alto Minho region, paved roads were open thoroughfares which facilitated high-speed traffic that slipped by unobserved. By introducing modern ideas and institutions, national thoroughfares also severed the present from the 'pastness' of peasant life (ibid.: 719). These dramatic changes are hardly restricted to rural Portugal. Society in general resists being controlled by the grid (Scott 1998). Tigrayans, for instance, deliberately tested boundaries between the public and the private realm by planting hedges or building structures within right-of-way boundaries, that is, within the space reserved for the road and public usage.

The majority of conflicts with local residents in south-eastern Tigray concerned so-called right-of-way issues – what in documents and formal correspondence was often abbreviated to 'ROW issues' – that arose from the annexation of property to make way for the road. It was the ERA's responsibility to compensate citizens for crops and structures and to prompt them to clear farm land and even pull down their own houses. Site clearance was a protracted and cumbersome process that, almost as a rule, continued during construction. The ERA, however critical to the process, was not present on-site. The Chinese were, and it fell to Chinese to deal directly with the protests. On the end section of the project road culvert, for instance, outlets were destroyed by local residents right after construction, and over an extended period of time. When hostilities increased, especially in the mountain section, something had to be done: the project manager assigned surveyor De Shanwen, who

possessed good social skills and a great deal of tact, as a full-time ROW agent. His job was to talk with people, and to carry out 'thought work' (*sixiang gongzuo*). De explained:

> The demolishing of buildings and the relocation of inhabitants (*chaiqian*) is a tough issue, in China as much as in Ethiopia. I would not pull down my house with pleasure either.
>
> …
>
> In Tsehafti [between Mehoni and Adiqey], for instance, even the village head (*cunzhang*) had built a new house [after compensation, within the ROW border]. We had discussed this in a meeting. At that time we went about step by step in the mountain section. We had not yet succeeded. At that time we talked with every single village head for about seven, eight days. Every time we went from village to village; every day, uninterruptedly we worked on this. We went through the whole lot. After that, after going along all the villages and talking with people and trying to convince them, they agreed to pull down their houses. The village head started and then the other people followed. It was quite hard at the time, especially for the village head, but now, after everything is finished, the local government is actually very happy.… Because the road is widened and provided with an asphalt layer. It has laid the foundation of the economic growth of the village.… I still have one photograph. It shows a small child of about seven, eight, nine years old. The boy went to site to pull down the house of his own family. I have even seen this. I made a few pictures of this. I find this very passionate (*reqing*). (De Shanwen, 24 May 2011)

I once accompanied De Shanwen, on his visit to kilometre 87 where an old woman was threatening to throw herself into an excavation ditch four metres deep were the Chinese to proceed with the construction of a pipe culvert outlet just below her house. The woman's house perched on a steep slope, separated from the excavation by little more than a narrow cactus hedge. The building work on the culvert outlet was postponed.

De Shanwen's counterpart was Addisu Abush, the ERA's ROW agent who remained at the consultant engineers' camp. Addisu's job was to calculate compensations for the annexation of vegetation, agricultural crops, and immovable goods. In Ethiopia land is owned by the state and tenured under temporary contracts. As a result, farmers were only compensated for vegetation and structures. Addisu Abush knew the compensation sums by heart: ETB 900 for a Wanza tree, ETB 600 for a eucalyptus tree, ETB 400 for a Konkurra tree, ETB 500 for a mature banana tree, ETB 200 for a young banana tree, ETB 800 for a *kuntal* (equivalent to 100 kilos) of barley, ETB 500 for a *kuntal* of maize. A field of teff

would yield a local farmer the highest sum: ETB 1,200 per *kuntal* (teff was the most laborious crop to grow). The compensation figures for trees and agricultural produce were revised each year. The price of teff had risen steadily, from ETB 800 per *kuntal* five years ago to ETB 950 and 1,150, respectively, in the previous two years. The loss of cactus plants was not compensated, although Addisu was of the opinion that they should have been. Cactus leaves were used as fodder for cows and goats; farmers would pierce the round leaves of the paddle cactus to jerk them from their stems, and collect them on a mule cart. Moreover, cactus fruit comprised an important part of the diet of local people during the summer months.

Needless to say, compensation for vegetation was the least contentious item to be negotiated. Structures, such as houses, sheds, or separations, were subject to fierce debate, not least as compensation was calculated in building material and hours of labour, rather than in type and size of structure. Addisu considered his job tough. 'If we touch property with only a finger, people demand huge compensations'. Whenever I saw Addisu along the road, he was always busy with a measuring tape or in discussions with residents. Although he had the final say Addisu also had to reach an agreement with his committee members, who came from the *woreda* and who leaned towards protecting the interests of local residents. Not surprisingly, central and local state interests clashed here as well. In order to eke out more compensation money from the national government, residents often built new houses right within ROW borders – the area reserved for the road, with an additional three metres on each side – after having pulled down their old homes, for which they had already received compensation. Such was the case with the Tsehafti village head.

I had long been curious about how narrow and bumpy this section of road was each time I crossed the village by bus from Addis Ababa to Alamata. Once I heard this story, I realized why: the villagers had won out over the road authorities. Laboratory technician Abel Tamrat told me about Karrakore, a village along the Addis Ababa-Axum road between

Dessie and Kombolcha, Amhara regional state. The Spanish construction consortium Dragados had upgraded this section of the north-south axis at the end of the 1990s and in the early 2000s. The village residents had refused to pull down their houses, despite having received financial compensation from the ERA. It took a long time and repeated efforts to convince Karrakore's inhabitants, until Dragados finally decided to jump over the one-and-a-half-kilometre village section and simply do some patch work on the existing asphalt layer.[46]

Abel told me this tale about Karrakore when Adiqey residents were holding up the asphalt works at kilometre 86, and he feared that history would repeat itself. His concerns turned out to be unfounded. The residents of Adiqey had staged repeated protests against the construction work, beginning in 2010, when they objected to the elevation – the 'vertical alignment', in engineers' terminology – of the road, which ran through the centre of their settlement. At issue was a disagreement about whether Adiqey was a village or a town. The original designs had designated the settlement a village, and the road alignment was designed accordingly. As per the ERA's design specifications for DS-4 roads, the vertical alignment of a road section running through a rural settlement did not have to take into account the elevation of the adjacent village structures. When crossing a town, however, the alignment had to be adjusted to the settlement's structures, such as houses and service facilities (bars, restaurants, shops) along the road. According to the Ethiopian Central Statistical Agency, a settlement with more than 2,000 inhabitants was considered urban. The population of Adiqey had increased significantly after 2007, when the contract documents had been drawn up and the settlement designated as a village – or literally as 'village and town', a term that proved even more confusing.

[46] Like the AH-project and the Ring Road Project, the project fell under the rules of the FIDIC (International Federation of Consulting Engineers; the acronym comes from its French name Fédération Internationale Des Ingénieurs-Conseils), which requires site clearance before construction, that is, before transfer of the site from the road authorities to the contractor.

Adiqey was situated on a slope. Initially, the road had been built such that its surface was as much as 1.06 metres lower or higher than the village (or town) structures on both sides of the road. Because of this awkward elevation, residents argued, traffic was less likely to stop and make use of Adiqey's service facilities, such as the many shops, restaurants, hotels, and workshops along the roadway. Inhabitants demanded that the elevation be revised. Many heated discussions followed in which regional government officials from Mekele, *woreda* administrators from Adigudem, and the governing body of the regional seat in Bahir Seba, as well as many others, all took part. The ERA laid the blame with the Chinese contractor for its failure to take into consideration the 'social acceptance' of the road's design. 'The road should not float above the people', Hakim Sisay, director of the ERA's Design and Build Department, remarked in a meeting with the contractor and consultant. 'But how do we know what the people want? Local people don't even know themselves what they want. They may agree today. Tomorrow they will ask for a design change', protested the project manager, Gu. After protracted and arduous debates, the issue was resolved by presenting five different design plans from which the village (or town) committee was to select one. The Chinese contractor would redo the construction accordingly. The ERA, however, refused to compensate for the revision of the Adiqey section, arguing that the project was a DB-project in which payment had been made in lump-sum fashion, and, further, that the contractor should have taken design revisions into account beforehand. Note the bargaining power of the ERA.

On my final day in south-eastern Tigray, residents of Adiqey had blocked the road again. They stood or sat down in front of the base-course paver, preventing Jianghe from continuing the base-course works. Local residents demanded cover stones for the new U-shaped ditches along the section that led through their settlement. Alamata, Kukufto, and Mehoni all had their ditches covered entirely, residents argued. It turned out that the

contractor and consultant had agreed on a design change in Adiqey to save costs. Only a few cover stones were to be placed at official crossings and at places where residents crossed the road frequently. Residents had gotten wind of this secret deal, which, they argued, disadvantaged them significantly. 'In fact, the local people have become consultants. The Chinese do not listen to us anymore. They listen to the local people', sighed Tesfay Adane as we drove past the blockage. 'When I was a teenager [late 1990s]', recalled Temesgen Abrham, 'they paved the road that runs through my hometown [Kobbo]. It was China Wanbao at the time. That was the first time that I saw asphalt. We [local people] did not know anything. But now, these people in Mehoni, they are developed. They know about the design. They know about the right concrete mix. They come to me with their comments'.

People have a tendency to claim the physical environment in which they live and transform it to their own ends (Campbell 2012; Harvey 2012; Dalakoglou 2010; Larkin 2008; Mrázek 2002). Not surprisingly, concern over the ownership of, and entitlement to, Ethiopian natural resources – construction material and the finished product, the road – was a driving factor in local protests. The struggle over recourses, both natural (e.g. sand and water) and processed (e.g. steel and cement), had a major impact on the nature of relations on the ground. Although confrontations between Ethiopians and Chinese took material form, they touched on more deeply rooted moral criticism. Local residents held protectionist sentiments about resources that were extracted from *their* area nearby the road. The Chinese, on the other hand, asserted ownership over resources their companies had processed in quarries or imported from abroad. When the Chinese contractor planned to use material from the quarry at kilometre 36 for a road project in Amhara (the contractor was short of material for the last stretch of road verges), local residents organised a sit-in at the quarry and halted the Chinese dump-trucks. Rumour had it that the Chinese were toying with the idea of transferring material from the quarry to Amhara regional state. Two factors were at play in this case: local

protectionism and regional rivalry (cf. Young 1998). Amhara, a contender for political supremacy, was often perceived as the antagonistic neighbour. Regionalism, too, coloured Sino-Ethiopian relations.

Protests also took the form of sabotaging the road works and enhancing the locale. From the day that base-course material was dumped on the road section running through Mehoni, it was subject to (re)appropriation by town residents. For one thing, the material was perfect in size and plasticity for casting concrete floors and walls. Some residents used the material for levelling their front or back yards. Women and children knelt down to put the stones, mostly by hand, in sacks or buckets. Men shovelled the material onto mule carts. Sometimes a Chinese would step out of his car and pull the carts to the ground to save the material, but such efforts were largely in vain, because the base-course theft went on for the entire day, over the entire section. In sum, it was impossible to curb the practice. An Orthodox-Christian priest had actually ordered several cart loads delivered to the Haile Selassie Church under construction, fifteen minutes walking distance from Mehoni. The church's construction had been slow; only the wooden fundaments had been erected, on a site where the high grass helms and weeds were still thriving. Indeed, material for church had yet to be collected – and when it was, it was collected from the road. Cement, large stones (most likely taken from the sub-base of the road), and base-course aggregate from the road-building project were appropriated for the church. Larger masonry stones used for the construction of culverts and ditches in the mountains were collected by local residents, who subsequently arranged the stones in neat piles a few metres away from their original sites. 'As soon as the stones are piled up neatly, we Chinese are not allowed to touch the stones anymore', laughed a Chinese engineer. Masonry stones were used for partitions, sheds, or chapels along the road. Local commandeering of material designated for road construction not only abounded, it was

practised freely and openly, regardless of what measures Chinese took to prevent the thefts from happening.

5.6 Strengthening the weak

Worker defiance and *in*discipline, as I have shown, involved more than what Scott (1985) has called the 'weapons of the weak', or what De Certeau has described as 'tactics' of everyday life, meaning 'the clandestine forms taken by the dispersed, tactical, and makeshift creativity of groups or individuals already caught in the nets of "discipline"' (1988[1984]: xiv-xv). Tactics, according to De Certeau's use of the word, are fragmentary actions or 'art[s] of the weak' (ibid.: 35) that take place in the other's space or disciplinary grid. More or less subtle defiance of managerial authority by Ethiopian workers, then, corresponded more to 'strategies' than tactics – as in calculated acts aimed against a known antagonist. According to De Certeau, strategists mostly operate outside the grid, in exterior spaces (ibid.: xix). This was not necessarily the case in the context of worker transgressions against managerial authority in south-eastern Tigray. Chinese management was challenged, as it were, from *within*. And it was challenged with the same discursive tools and methods used to discipline the local work force.

Ethiopian workers put the authority of expatriate management to the test by appropriating ideas and concepts that had been introduced by management itself with the implementation of labour discipline, and using these *against* management. This was done in a fashion similar to the process described by Comaroff and Comaroff (1986), in their analysis of the Evangelist missionary project in South-Africa. Evangelist missionaries proved relatively successful in restructuring the conceptual universe of native Africans and had laid the foundation for their integration as wage workers into the capitalist mode of production (see also Comaroff 1985). Practices instilled by the mission, however, came to support a new

order that exposed the missionary's own contradictions. As a result, the emergence of languages of protest based on concepts of individual freedom – concepts that had been introduced by the mission in the first place – came to shake the very foundation of the mission (ibid.: 2). The same was true, at least partly, in the case of Chinese activities in south-eastern Tigray. It was Chinese employers who promoted the idea of casual wage labour, but it was Ethiopian workers who used that idea (or ideal) to trigger competition between Chinese companies. By ascribing to high job mobility and by voting with their feet, local labourers were able to play one Chinese employer against another. In this way, the Ethiopians were able to increase their bargaining power and demand higher wages as well as better working conditions. Neo-liberal ideas of a free labour market were also used against the expatriate management, as I will demonstrate in the next chapter.

The most common responses of Chinese managers to more or less subtle forms of defiance were silence or compromise. Oftentimes the Chinese could not do a thing to change a situation to their advantage. For one thing, Chinese lacked the authority to intervene, which meant that the best solution, from their perspective, was simply to swallow their anger and remain silent. At least this way, they could save face, safeguard their credibility, or prevent more harm from befalling their reputation. Especially towards the end of the project, Chinese managers were compelled to give way regarding work times, advance payments on salaries, and medical expense coverage. When one worker at the asphalt plant bruised his fingers, he received ETB 150 from Liu Deye to visit the local health clinic. Such support, though, depended on the generosity of the manager. Without project-wide regulations, rewards or financial compensations could simply serve as modes of punishment, particularly since they were subject to the manager's personal whims. Ethiopian workers were well aware of the inability of their foreign managers to fully control them, and so became skilled at trying the patience of their managers and challenging company rules. With the religious festival Timket,

manager Zhang Guannan spotted his personal driver, who had called in sick that day, on the street in Alamata, drinking coffee and chatting with friends. The young man waved to his Chinese employer as he passed by. Zhang smiled. There was nothing he could do. Luckily, he possessed an Ethiopian driving license and so could drive himself when his driver was absent. Situations like these seemed innocent enough. In the next chapter, however, I demonstrate how the consequences of accumulated acts of defiance were far more significant than they appeared at first glance.

6. Entangled in Lawsuits

'Please tell *The New York Times* about the hardships we bear in Africa when you get back home', said Liu Deye suddenly as we were driving through Mehoni town. Liu's eyes were fixed on the road, his hands clamped around the steering wheel. Every time someone stepped out in front of him, he gave an angry blow on the claxon and cursed: 'Your mind is sick!' ('*naozi you bing*!'). Liu and I had just come from a court hearing in which two former workers of Golden Roads had sued the company after their dismissal in the aftermath of a labour strike. Liu, though, still did not know what he had been charged with. The court summons and the copy of the complaint, which the workers had brought to the asphalt plant compound the week before, had been drawn up in Tigrinya. Neither had Liu understood what was being said in the hearing. He used the sleeve of his camouflage jacket to wipe sweat off his forehead. 'This country does not know what jurisdiction is', he sighed. He remained silent until we arrived at the asphalt plant, where he disappeared into his room. Since the onset of the project, the number of lawsuits filed by Ethiopian workers against their Chinese employers, contractor and subcontractors alike, had surged. In Raya Azebo Woreda Court in Mehoni the number of lawsuits involving Chinese had risen from 4 in 2009 to 13 in 2010 and 22 in 2011. The figure stood at 59 by mid-2012.

Completing projects in a short period of time while keeping financial losses to a minimum meant that Chinese companies in south-eastern Tigray had to operate with an attitude akin to that of early capitalist enterprises. Expatriate employers routinely sidestepped established procedures and legal regulations. Ethiopian workers were dismissed at will and wages docked capriciously. Employment contracts were rare, as were rest days for the workers. As the project advanced, however, Chinese employers eventually came to pay for their ignorance (or neglect) of workers' rights and protections. Ethiopian labourers exercised a variety of ways, some subtle, some less so, to keep their Chinese managers in check and to improve wage levels, work schedules, overtime allowances, and so forth. The workers did so either by their own efforts, as discussed in the previous chapter, or with the help of local state institutions, such as courts and civic authorities.

By commanding respect for Ethiopian labour law, local legal institutions came to play a crucial role in negotiating workers' conditions. These institutions raised awareness among labourers about their rights and protections, and testified in the surge of lawsuits filed by workers against their Chinese employers. In particular, *woreda* courts[47] and informal legal brokers, such as professional writers and law student interns, came to mediate relations between expatriate management and the local work force. To the consternation and bewilderment of Chinese employers, financial damages awarded to Ethiopians in court just kept rising. Chinese managers failed to understand what they perceived as ingratitude on the part of Ethiopian labourers, or the assistance that court and town administrations offered to complainants. The attitude of the local state in Tigray went against Chinese managers' ideas of the developing state and its proper role in stimulating local economic growth. In China, construction consortia form strong coalitions with local governments (Zhang 2010). The latter are expected to create a favourable business environment (e.g. offering low taxes), to

[47] *Woreda* courts were courts operating at the *woreda* level of administration. They stood above *kebele* courts and below district courts, such as the court in Maychew.

mediate relations with the local work force, and, in some cases, to assist with labour recruitment and surveillance (Kim 2013; Zhu 2004). Legal and civic authorities in Tigray, however, did not appear to be prepared to support Chinese enterprises in their ventures. On the contrary, Chinese employers found that they were hamstrung, and their attempts at helping local developed routinely curtailed.

6.1 Victims of law

It was Berihun Desta, a young lawyer working for the ERA, who made me realise that the Chinese had become victims of their own labourers. One morning in March 2012 I escorted him, together with a consultant engineer, to Mekele airport via the old Italian-built route, through the mountains. Berihun had been in the consultant camp for a week to settle two court cases. As a lawyer for the ERA, he dealt chiefly with right-of-way cases: cases regarding compensation for the annexation of private property (e.g. crops, houses) to make way for the road. He had come to Mehoni, where the consultant and contractor's compounds were situated, to finalise what he called 'unfair cases'. Some Tigrayans, in his eyes, were claiming unreasonably high compensation. They often disagreed with the amount of money offered by the ERA for a house, a tree, or a fence that had to make way for the road, and would submit their case to the district court in Maychew. This then required Berihun to come in person, from Addis Ababa. He talked about one case he had dealt with, in which a local had asked for ETB 75,000 for a pile of stones (not yet cemented) seven metres long and nearly one metre high. 'A twenty metre long cemented wall would not come near this amount of money', said Berihun. Yet, he added placidly: 'But ERA usually wins.' We curved up and down steep slopes, looking out over grasslands in valleys. The mountains were much greener than the plain along the first section of the project road.

It was evident to Berihun that the Chinese were involved in a great number of labour cases dealt with by the local courts, and it struck him as a problem. 'ERA normally supports the victim. If labourers are being mistreated, we stand behind the labourers'. But in this case, he explained, the Chinese had become victims. Why? I asked. 'Local courts often judge in favour of locals. They know that the Chinese do not obey the law.… We [ERA] advised the Chinese many times to observe the Ethiopian labour law. The contractor is not the problem. It is the subcontractors that do not listen'. He did not blame the Chinese. 'Here [in Tigray] the courts have become biased to the extent that the judges do not keep strictly to the Ethiopian law anymore.… They look into one direction'. It was hardly rare for contractors to be summoned to court, yet the number of cases in this region was exceptionally high. Whether it was because the local people were more articulate, or the Chinese more ignorant, about Ethiopian labour laws concerning wages, work hours, and severance payments, was difficult to tell.

The situation was complex. On the one hand, there was a clash between national and local interests. This was clear from the ROW case described by Berihun. 'If you have to choose between the road and your farmland everybody would make the same choice,' a Chinese engineer put it. Conflicting state versus local interests are common in road building in Ethiopia, China and elsewhere. Yet, in this case clashing interests were intensified by regionalism and ethnic sentiments. Locals from the region did not hesitate to defend their interests against the central state and the expatriate employers. Tigrayans expected the state to act in their favour, so long as an Amhara-dominated bureaucracy did not stand in the way (Young 1997: 197). Whereas Berihun and his ERA colleagues were of Amhara origin, the government and the ERA's board of directors were largely of Tigrinya origin – a difference that arguably accounted for the fact that the claims of Tigrayans were particularly high. 'ERA

is scared of the people in this region,' the chief surveyor of the consultant once remarked sarcastically.

Fiscal losses suffered by subcontractors varied. Among the Chinese subcontractors on the Ring Road Project, Qimo Construction had suffered the most damage in court. The private company from Fujian had lost about ETB 1million during the first year of the project alone. 'In the beginning our company did not have a clue about Ethiopian labour law', explained Li Hang, Qimo's interpreter and assistant manager. We were just about to sit at one of the wobbly wooden tables in the dining hall of the company's compound at kilometre 14 when she spoke. It was just after lunch. All the other employees had left for an afternoon nap. Chicken pecked about our feet in search of scraps. 'But we have learned our lesson. Ethiopia is a democracy. Local people are keen on going to court. They think we Chinese have a lot of money. They only need three witnesses, and [they] win their case. Ethiopians defend Ethiopians'. Qimo's executive director had initially refrained from hiring a lawyer, afraid that the commission fees would cost more than the potential damages awarded to complainants by the court. Lawyers, who spoke Tigrinya, the language used in courts in Tigray,[48] could ask for anywhere between ETB 5,000 and 7,000 commission per case. That was steep enough. In addition, lawyers were also local, which meant they were largely distrusted by Chinese. Even so, as the number of charges against the subcontractor increased, the executive director realized that he had no other option but to hire a lawyer. From then on Qimo employed a lawyer on a part-time basis. The young Tigrayan man had come fresh from Khartoum, where he had completed a graduate degree in law. He was fluent in English and the only person to appear on the building site wearing a suit.

After our belated lunch, Li Hang showed me around Camp 14, which was situated next to Ta'a village on the flat section, between Alamata and Kukufto. The courtyard in front

[48] Since Ethiopia, or the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, is a federal state, every regional state is allowed to instate its own ethnic language as the officially recognised language, to be used in all regional state institutions.

of a row of prefabricated housing, which had been transferred from Camp 86 to push forward the building work at the Alamata section, was filled with scrap metal, broken concrete pipes, bent steel bars, and dump trucks waiting on repair. A corrugated iron structure accommodated the kitchen and the dining room. The toilets in the back corner of the compound were surrounded by bright yellow meadow flowers. Li Hang slept in the women's bedroom at the far end, in the only room that contained a toilet and a shower (a simple showerhead hung above the squat toilet). On the white wall of her bedroom hung a list of unfinished court cases: the first column containing the names of individuals who had sued the company, grouped by occupation (e.g. labourer, mason, excavator operator); the second column showing the names of potential witnesses; and the third column listing claims made, most of which exceeded ETB 10,000. Next to this list was another A4 paper, filled with drawings of little suns and corresponding dates from the calendar. Li had used a pen to colour in the suns and signify the weather: a full work day would be represented by a fully coloured sun, while rainy days warranted only half-suns. Li Hang explained that local workers were quick to claim wages for days on which they had not worked due to rainy weather. Using this table, she could refute the workers' claims.

According to staff members of the project department, the damages suffered in court had to do with the company's poor management of Ethiopian employees. 'Drivers of Qimo steal'. 'Guards of Qimo steal everything they can lay hands on'. Rumours like these spread like wildfire. But the contractor and other subcontractors like Wuhe Construction and Duyin enterprise were also entangled in lawsuits, as the growing number of cases concerning Chinese enterprises and individuals in Raya Azebo Woreda Court attests. Raya Azebo Woreda Court had not dealt with cases involving foreign nationals before the arrival of the Chinese in Mehoni. Since the start of the project in 2008, 99 cases of a total of 7,805 cases concerned Chinese enterprises or individuals. In 98 of these cases the Chinese were being

charged, chiefly with the violation of labour rights. In only one case had the Chinese contractor had made the move to court, after 18 truck tyres were stolen from the storage shed next to the Huang De's car workshop. The theft was revealed when the police spotted young men at daybreak, hurriedly rolling tyres over the new tarmac road in the direction of Mehoni Town. One of the guards was accused of having organised the theft. The case dragged on, as the main witness, the guard, was also a suspect. In the last half a year, between September 2011 and March 2012, Chinese nationals had been involved in as many as 59 of the 1,108 cases, total. The lion's share of these court cases concerned labour issues and had been filed by labourers after being dismissed by their Chinese employer. Workers had claimed unpaid wages, severance payments, and other kinds of damage restitution.

'The Chinese fire workers without cause or warning,' explained Dabir Negasi, an Ethiopian staff member of the Chinese contractor who dealt with *woreda* courts in Mehoni, Alamata, and in the district court in Maychew on a frequent basis. 'The judge typically calculates a few months of salary and various compensations for transport costs, holidays, and overtime. He specifies this with a list. This happens in 90 per cent of the cases'. Dabir was about to leave for Alamata to find out which subcontractor had lost the lawsuits for which the Raya Alamata Court had deducted funds from the contractor's bank account with the Alamata branch of the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia. The bank statements did not indicate which subcontractor had lost the cases in question. The Chinese were, after all, seen as representing one company. The sum of ETB 33,261 had been deducted on 2 November. The sums of ETB 12,650 and 12,315 deducted on 15 November 2011 had likely been transferred to individual workers who had sued their Chinese employer after dismissal. Bank withdrawals like these could be ordained by the courts, including *woreda* courts that were not immediately situated along the project road. This meant that cases ended up as far away as

Chärchär, south-west of Mehoni, representing workers from regions farther away. The sums, it should be noted, were automatically deducted if the contractor failed to pay.

The lax attitude of Chinese management towards Ethiopian labour regulations upset legal authorities. 'The Chinese think they can dismiss someone who arrives too late at work', said Judge Abrham Ermiyas, who worked at the Raya Azebo Woreda Court. 'They just don't care about their Ethiopian employees. It is a huge problem'. Lower-level Chinese managers had been ordinary workers themselves in China; few of them took an interest in local labour rights and regulations. Moreover, for those with work experience in the Chinese construction industry, road construction in Ethiopia was perceived as primitive, poorly organised, and devoid of strict regulations. As a result, the lower-level managers did not feel the urge to work, or act, according to protocol. To set the managers' motivation in context, it should be said that it was not until 2008 that a robust labour law came into force in China. The 1995 Labour Law had excluded migrants from the countryside, which led to the widespread exploitation of their labour. That said, lack of respect and interest in legal regulations goes against the increased awareness of legal rights and protections that scholars have noted among rural migrant workers in China (e.g. Lee 2007). Managerial decisions based on personal whim and rules made on spot cast the Chinese mangers in a bad light. In the eyes of Ethiopians the attitude of Chinese management was perceived as a lack of respect towards Ethiopian society, its labour laws, and regulations.

6.2 A Chinese reading of the Ethiopian Labour Law

Lower- and middle-level managers complained that Ethiopian Labour Law was biased towards ordinary workers and that it jeopardized management's attempts to organise labour in an efficient way. By extension, labour regulations were seen as impeding economic development. Few Chinese had actually read the Ethiopian Labour Proclamation. Their

objections to the Law were based on the growing number of lawsuits filed against their companies. Chinese labour practices in Ethiopia were mainly based on common practices, that is, on what management saw other Chinese companies do, rather than on legal regulations. Disregard for Ethiopian labour regulations on the part of Chinese management was a recurring issue. This did not apply to labour law alone, but to legal documents in general, such as contract documents and specifications. The deputy project manager once contended that the contract documents were all Latin to him. Ethiopians, on the other hand, appeared much more aware of legal regulations.

Asphalt plant operator Dai Tianhan forwarded me a Chinese translation of the Ethiopian Labour Proclamation (including an English translation). Dai had been employed by Golden Roads from the very beginning and had taken up the task of administering company documents, which he filed in the desktop computer in his cabin and from where he also operated the asphalt plant. This document originated with the Serdo-Afdera-Afrahaik road upgrading project, and was (I assume, although I cannot state with certainty) produced by its project department. The translator was unknown. Dai received the document, which must have been in circulation on at least three road projects, after his arrival in Mille. The translation was likely aimed at educated Chinese middle-level managers. At the time I had skimmed the document and put it aside without paying much attention to it. Only as I began to delve into Ethiopian labour regulations more deeply once I had returned from the field did I discover that a significant number of articles based on the Ethiopian Labour Proclamation No. 42/1993 or Ethiopian Labour Proclamation No. 377/2003 were missing. Instead of adapting labour practices to the law, it seemed as if the Chinese translator of the document had adjusted the law to Chinese labour practices. Tellingly, the missing articles hint at what were considered sensitive issues by management. The articles left out of the Chinese translation offer insight into labour relations between Chinese managers and Ethiopian

workers on the ground, but they still do not account for the prevalent tension between Chinese management and Ethiopian workers. As said, Chinese labour practices were based on common practices rather than legal regulations.

The original Ethiopian Labour Proclamation consists of 193 articles. Only 48 articles appear in the Chinese document. The translation begins with Article 11, which stipulates regulations in regard to the probation period of workers, and leaves out completely Division One (articles 4 to 8) of the employment contract. The missing articles define the terms and conditions of the employment contract, which must be generated in written form and contain: the name and address of the employer, as well as the name, age, address, and work card number of the worker; the type of employment; the rate of wages; and, as described in missing articles 9 and 10, the type of contract (e.g. indefinite or definite period of employment). In practice, Chinese companies, subcontractors in particular, failed to draft written employment contracts. Their employment relations with Ethiopian staff were oftentimes based exclusively on verbal agreements. Administrative practices of Chinese subcontracting companies like Golden Roads were, in a word, sub-standard.

At the time of my stay at the asphalt plant, Golden Roads did not offer employment contracts to Ethiopian employees. A simple worker profile, drawn up by Dai Tianhan, provided a confirmation of employment with the company. The profile included a black-and-white photograph taken with Dai's webcam, the name of the worker in Chinese pinyin – as in YiLiMa (Yilma), SaLaMan (Solomon), HaTuLong (Haftu) – a signature, and a red print of the employee's index finger. The following line, where one would normally state one's age, was mostly left blank. Chinese management had little clue about the ages of its Ethiopian employees. A line stating the month and year of commencement of the job (not the exact date) followed, and, at last, the type of job. Workers did not receive any documents stating that they were employed with Golden Roads. The worker profile sheets – three profiles fit onto a

single page – remained in the sole possession of the immediate employer. In case of other subcontractors, such as Qimo, the time sheets of labourers were the only evidence of employment relations. The absence of employment contracts for Ethiopian employees was common practice. Employees of subcontractors, I sensed, considered it a perfectly normal procedure, despite the fact that they had received labour contracts themselves. The colour bar appeared to normalise ethnic disparities in employment conditions.

The following articles, which stipulate the obligations of the employer and the worker, are included in the Chinese version. However, Division Four (Article 15 and 16) on the modification of the employment contract is left out. Division Five appears in the translation, apart from Article 22 on the obligation of the employer to reinstate a worker if he or she reports for work on the date of expiry of suspension. Chapter II of Part Two sets out the terms and conditions of the termination of employment relations. Most of these articles (e.g. on termination by law, agreement, or by the employer, and so forth) appear in the Chinese version, apart from articles 29 and 30, which stipulate regulations in regard to the reduction of workers – a common practice in the building sector in general. Article 31 dealing with the termination of contract *with* notice states that 'any worker who has completed his probation period may, by giving 15 days' prior notice to the employer, terminate his contract of employment', is missing, whereas Article 32 on the termination *without* notice is included.

Management was accustomed to labourers who resigned without notice. Some simply walked away. Most articles of the subsequent chapter on common provisions with respect to termination appear in the Chinese version, except for articles 37 and 42. Article 37 follows on Article 36, which stipulates: 'Where a contract of employment is terminated, wages and other payments connected with wages due to the worker shall be paid within seven working day[s] from the date of termination….' Article 37 says that 'in the event of a dispute as to the amount claimed by the worker the employer shall pay the worker the sum not in dispute

within the time-limit specified under article 36'. Article 42 states that 'where an employer or a worker fails to comply with the requirements laid down in this Proclamation regarding termination, the termination shall be unlawful'. Chapter IV on special contracts (e.g. homework and apprenticeship contracts) is also left out of the Chinese translation. These articles were probably not deemed of much importance, as Chinese employers did not employ apprentices or assign homework.

The third part of the Labour Proclamation stipulates regulations in regard to wages and mode of payment. Also here the Chinese version is selective about which articles are to be included and which left out. Below is Part III of the Ethiopian Labour Proclamation. The articles left out of the Chinese version appear in grey, the ones included are in black.

PART III. WAGES[49]
Chapter I. Determination of Wages

53. **General**. (1) "Wages" means the regular payment to which the worker is entitled in return for the performance of the work that he performs under a contract of employment.

(2) For the purposes of this Proclamation, the following payments shall not be considered as wages:

(a) overtime pay;
(b) amount received by way of per-diems, hardship allowances, transport allowance, transfer expenses, and similar allowance payable to the worker on the occasion of travel or change of his residence;
(c) bonus;
(d) commission;
(e) other incentives paid for additional work results;
(f) service charge received from customers.

54. **Conditions of Payment for Idle Time**. (1) Unless otherwise provided for in this Proclamation or the relevant law, wages shall be paid only for work done.

(2) Notwithstanding Sub-Article (1) of this Article, a worker shall be entitled to his wage if he was ready to work but, because of interruptions in supply of tools and row [raw] materials or for reasons not attributable to him was not able to work.

Chapter II. Mode and Execution of Payment

55. **General**. Wages shall be paid in cash, provided, however, that where the employer and worker so agree, it may be paid in kind. Wages paid in kind may not exceed the market value in the area of the payment in kind and in no case may exceed 30% of the wages paid in cash.

[49] Original document.

56. **Execution of Payments**. (1) Unless otherwise agreed, wages shall be paid on working day and at the place of work.

(2) In case where the payment mentioned in Sub-Article (1) of this Article falls on Sunday or a public holiday, the day of payment shall fall on the preceding working day.

57. **Payment in Person**. Unless otherwise provided by law or collective agreement, wages shall be paid directly to the worker or to a person delegated by him.

58. **Time of Payment**. Wages shall be paid at such intervals as are provided for by law or collective agreement or work rules or contract of employment.

59. **Deduction from Wages**. (1) The employer shall not deduct from, attach or set off the wages of the worker except where it is provided otherwise by law or collective agreement or work rules or in accordance with a court order or a written agreement of the worker.

(2) The amount in aggregate that may be deducted, at any one time, from the worker's wages shall in no case exceed one-third of his monthly wages.

60. **Keeping Record of Payment**. (1) The employer shall keep a register of payment specifying the gross pay and method of calculation of the wages, other variable remunerations, the amount and types of deductions, the net pay and other relevant particulars, unless there is a special arrangement, on which the signature of the worker is affixed.

(2) The employer shall have the obligation to make the register accessible, and to explain the entries thereof, to the worker at his request.

(3) The fact that a worker has received without protest the net amount indicated on the register shall not constitute waiver of his right to any part of his wages that was due.

The missing articles appear to be quite crucial. Chinese employers conformed to articles 55 to 58 but failed to specify the gross pay and method of wage calculation (Article 60). Neither did employers record the amount and types of wage deductions, which led to workers' discontent, especially on payday. As was the case with most labour issues, workers' discontent was located in the so-called natural disposition and neediness of Ethiopians, or Africans in general, rather than in Chinese management practices. Management only reflected on its own employment practices after lost court cases. Practices were altered such as to protect the company rather than the worker. This pattern, I would argue, is common in inter-class relations and was merely aggravated by ethnic divisions and disparities.

Only Article 61 of Chapter I (Hours of Work) of Part Four (Hours of Work, Weekly Rest and Public Holidays), which stipulates that the number of work hours cannot exceed

eight hours a day, or 48 hours per week, appears in the Chinese translation. Regulations on the reduction of hours by the employer are, however, missing. Article 66 on the general terms of overtime is included – not, however, the circumstances in which overtime work is permissible (Article 67) when there is an actual or threatened accident, a force majeure, urgent work [sic], or the substitution of absent workers on work that runs continuously without interruption. Otherwise a worker may not be compelled to work overtime. Article 68 on overtime payment is included, arguably due to the numerous court cases on this issue. Workers sometimes had to work up to eleven or twelve hours per day, despite that the proclamation states that a regular work day cannot exceed eight hours under standard salary regulations. For the extra hours Chinese employers should pay workers according to the overtime rate – according to missing Article 69 – although in practice many failed to do so. Occasionally workers were rewarded in-kind. One time the Chinese manager of the all-Ethiopian company managed to convince his workers to continue working until midnight to finish a box culvert before the forecasted rain the next day. He distributed *kollo* (toasted whole grains), a bottle of Coca Cola, Sprite, or Miranda, and an ad hoc cash gift (a ETB 100 billet) to each worker.

Wages were calculated per day, not per hour. As a result, labourers rarely received additional overtime payment. Work days were long, especially when a particular structure had to be finished before the next day or an asphalt section completed before forecasted rain. The Ethiopian Labour Proclamation prescribed that work carried out in addition to the eight hours per day be considered overtime. The over-hour rate was 1.25 times the regular hourly rate in the case of work carried out between six o'clock in the morning and ten o'clock in the evening. In the case of work carried out outside this time frame the hourly rate had to be multiplied by 1.5 (Article 66). When work was carried out on weekly rest days, that is, on Sundays, the hourly rate should be multiplied by two. Sundays were not only rest days by

regulation but also by Orthodox-Christian belief and custom, which made the employer's insistence on working these days particularly sensitive. Some Chinese believed that Ethiopian employees got away with a better deal than Chinese foremen. Wuhe's Lao Zhao did not pay overtime allowances to his Chinese employees. He was said to make his Chinese employees patrol the construction machinery outside work hours and charged them if spare parts or petrol was stolen. Ethiopian workers sometimes received bonuses. Chinese staff of companies Wuhe and Qimo did not.

Part Four of the Labour Proclamation was contentious. Chinese companies worked seven days a week. Workers were not granted rest days unless they explicitly asked for a day off. A rest day would, by definition, be unpaid. Ethiopian construction companies only worked on Sundays, I was told by the consultant engineers, if there were outstanding works to be completed. Otherwise they took the day off. Anxious not to waste time at the cost of productivity, the Chinese were preoccupied with time and its arrangement, according to Ethiopians. Whereas Chinese managers used to think in terms of timed labour – time that was needed for labour – and organise labour within set time frames around daily fixtures, Ethiopians were more task-oriented. Divergent opinions as how to use and arrange time productively are common in early industrial settings, but they should not be understood as absolute (Cooper 1992; Thompson 1967), or in terms of modern versus traditional or productive versus unproductive (Parry 1999; Atkins 1988; Smith 1986). Management perceived their use of time as modern and efficient and that of Ethiopians as irrational and inefficient. For the Chinese, the value of time and the efficient use of time were more important than the task ahead. Meze Negus argued:

> The Chinese don't follow our instructions. They are more interested in time, you see. What they see is time. They don't care about the instructions. What they want is to finish the work on time. That is a problem. They have so many issues [conflicts and quarrels] with the consultant staff, even when I just arrived.… If they are scheduled to do something, also if the condition is not good for work, they just work, to work on time. For example, if there is moisture in the soil part. They should wait until it will be dry. The Chinese will not follow

> that instruction. They simply say 'I should work, I should work.' So they should work. (Meze Negus, laboratory technician consultant, interview 27 June 2012)

Chinese lower- and middle-level managers organised work around daily fixtures, such as meals and rest time (e.g. afternoon nap). The project manager of the Addis Ababa Ring Road Project was often poked fun at. 'Mister Ding, no lunch go?!' giggled one of his workers when it was a few minutes past 12 o'clock. In contrast, Ethiopian workers and managers of subcontractors arranged meals and rest time around work. Lunch or dinner was consumed after a certain task or road section was completed. As a result, meal times fluctuated. The rigid time regime of the Chinese contractor clashed with the work rhythm of Ethiopian subcontractors. Conflicting conceptions of time and temporal reckoning caused misunderstandings and led to quarrels on-site. Tigrayan workers of Chinese companies, most of whom were used to consuming only two meals a day – one in the late morning and one in the early evening – had to alter their meal patterns to authorised intervals before and after a work day and when the Chinese were away for lunch. But the strict time regime of the Chinese did not always conflate with the task-oriented nature of road construction, and one can question if it was in fact the more productive approach.

Starting from Article 69 the following two chapters on weekly rest and public holidays are completely left out of the Chinese version:

Chapter II. Weekly Rest

69. **General.** (1) A worker shall be entitled to a weekly rest period consisting of not less than Twenty-four non-interrupted hours in the course of each period of seven days.

(2) Unless otherwise determined by a collective agreement, the weekly rest period provided for in sub-article (1) of this Article shall, whenever possible:

(a) fall on a Sunday;

(b) be granted simultaneously to all of the workers of the undertaking.

(3) The weekly rest period shall be calculated as to include the period from 6 p.m. to the next 6 p.m.

70. **Special Weekly Rest Scheme**. (1) Where the nature of the work or the service performed by the employer is such that the weekly rest cannot fall on a Sunday another day may be made a weekly rest as a substitute.

(2) The provisions of sub-article (1) of this Article shall be applicable to the following and similar activities:

(a) work that has to supply the necessities of life or meet the health, recreational or cultural requirements of the general public;
(b) essential public services such as electricity, water, communication, transport and similar others;
(c) work which, because of its nature or for technical reasons, if interrupted or postponed could cause difficulties or damages.

71. **Work done on weekly rest days**. (1) A worker may be required to work on any weekly rest day only where it is necessary to avoid serious interference with the ordinary working of the undertaking in the case of:

(a) accident, actual or threatened;
(b) force majeure;
(c) urgent work to be done.

(2) Subject to the provisions of Article 68(c), a worker who, by virtue of the provisions of this Chapter, works on a weekly rest day, shall be entitled to a compensatory rest period; provided, however, that he shall be compensated in the form of money if his contract of employment is terminated before he is granted the compensatory rest period.

72. **Application**. (1) The provisions of this chapter shall not apply to commercial travellers or representatives.

(2) The Minister may issue directives determining the special application of the provisions of this Chapter to workers who are directly engaged in the carriage of passengers and goods.

Chapter III. Public Holidays

73. **General**. Public holidays observed under the relevant law shall be paid public holidays.

74. **Non-reduction of wages**. (1) A worker who is paid on a monthly basis shall incure [sic] no reduction in his wages on account of having not worked on a public holiday.

(2) The payment of wages on a public holiday to a worker other than the payment mentioned under sub-article (1) of this Article shall be determined by his contract of employment or collective agreement.

75. **Payment for work on public holidays**. (1) A worker shall be paid his hourly wages multiplied by two for each hour of work on a public holiday.

(2) Where a public holiday coincides with another public holiday or falls on a rest day designated by this proclamation or any other special law, the worker shall be entitled to only one payment for working on such a day.

The majority of subcontractors also worked on national holidays, such as Epiphany and Easter, with Ethiopian New Year as an exception. In addition to annual festival days, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church celebrates eleven monthly holidays: Bata, Abou, Sellassie, Saint

Michael, Kidanemeheret, Saint Gabriel, Saint Mary, Saint George, Teklehaimanot, Medahnialem, Balegziabher, Tsgie, and Senbetie (Getachew 1998: 500). Ordinary Christians only honour a few of these days. On these holidays workers restrain from (farm) work and spend their time on household chores and social activities. Holidays thus fulfilled an important social function. The fact that Chinese continued construction work on national holidays offended local Tigrayans, workers and residents alike, who saw this as a sign of disrespect vis-à-vis God as much as the Ethiopian people. Many workers called in ill or simply stayed away on holidays. Grumbling that Ethiopians celebrated too many festivals, Chinese management still could not do much but accept these practices.

Regulations on working hours and rest time provided in Chinese Labour Law (2013 [1995]) were not significantly different. Article 36 stipulates that a work day should not exceed eight hours, and a work week 44 hours (ibid.: 47), and Article 38 grants employees one whole rest day a week. If a company seeks to deviate from these regulations, it requires permission from the Labour Administration (Article 39) (ibid.: 48). Employers are allowed to let their employees work one extra hour a day on a monthly average. For special reasons an employer can extend overtime to three hours a day, or 36 hours a month, yet only if the health and safety of the workers are guaranteed (ibid.: 50). The designated Chinese national rest days are New Year's Day, Spring Festival, National Labour Day, and October First. On these days employees must be granted rest (Article 40) (ibid.: 49). In Tigray Chinese continued work on most of these days, except for Chinese New Year – although they often celebrated other holidays with festive meals in the evening. Away from home, they did not have family obligations and, as they normally worked seven days a week, they had few past-time activities. Consequently, Chinese migrants often failed to recognise the value of Ethiopian holidays for Ethiopians. In fact, they complained about the many holidays Ethiopians celebrated, which were perceived as stemming from a poor work ethos.

Also the articles under Chapter I (Preventive Measures) Part Seven on 'Occupational Safety, Health and Working Environment' were missing. These articles defined the employer's obligation to provide health and safety for employees. As discussed in the previous chapter, the failure of Chinese employers to supply Ethiopian employees with work clothes and safety equipment, such as gloves, footwear, and safety helmets, was a bone of contention. In China, provisions in the Labour Law (Zhonghua Renmin Gonghe Guo 2013 [1995]) and the Construction Law (1998) protect the health and safety of employees. Chapter 6 of the Chinese Labour Law (2013: 57-61) stipulates the regulations in regard to 'safety and sanitation of the work force' ('*laodong anquan weisheng*'). Article 54 requires the employer to provide sanitation measures and protection equipment (*fanghu yongpin*) and to arrange health examinations in case of occupational accidents (ibid.: 58). However, regulations on health and safety do not define concrete responsibilities of employers. In this respect the Ethiopian Labour Law is more precise. Missing Article 92 of the Ethiopian Labour Law states that the employer shall 'provide workers with personal protective equipment, clothing and materials and instruct them of their use'. Safety records of construction companies in China are poor (Tam et al. 2004). Many companies fail to provide workers with adequate personal protection equipment (ibid.: 583). Limited health and safety has been attributed to the poor safety awareness of management (ibid.: 584). In Ethiopia, the situation in Chinese companies was worse. The articles on health care payments to injured workers are the final articles of the Chinese version of the Ethiopian Labour Proclamation. The subsequent parts on labour disputes and trade unions do not appear at all in the Chinese version. Chinese managers saw unionisation and collective actions of workers against management, by definition, as illegal.

Ethiopian workers also failed to abide by certain labour regulations – equally due to ignorance. They resigned without advance notice and initiated strikes without informing their

employer or the concerned government office (articles 158 and 159 in the Labour Proclamation). The activities of one were a response to the actions of the other, and vice versa. Chinese bad practices caused workers to act in an equally bad manner to protest or to protect them against managerial caprice. A comparison of the Chinese translation of the Ethiopian Labour Proclamation and the Amharic/English version not only reveals the most common bad practices of Chinese employers but also explains the ease with which workers, legal authorities, and brokers could find loopholes for legal counter-actions against the Chinese to punish them for their ignorant attitude.

6.3 In court

On the morning of the first of February 2012, the sound of rolling drums finally faded away. The workers at the asphalt plant had begun the day as always, collecting empty bitumen drums from the previous day and rolling them to the residential compound, where they were piled up against the fence. The morning passed as usual. The kitchen assistant was the first to rise, to prepare breakfast, which usually consisted of steamed-stuffed buns, rice gruel, or bouillon, along with little dishes of salted peanuts and pickled vegetables or vegetables left over from the previous meal. Meanwhile, the cleaning lady watered the vegetable garden with the buckets she normally used for washing clothes. The cook was the last one to get out of bed. Lian Du's work day started with the preparation of lunch. Wang Taihe was busy carrying out chores, while Li Hongde made his way to the asphalt plant with his clipboard, workers' time sheets bundled under his arm, to find all the workers other than Bekele, who was working at the back of the plant, gathered outside the compound. The workers were embroiled in a debate. The guards stood back, and watched from a safe distance. '*Mïndïn naw*? *Mïndïn naw*?' ('What is the matter?') asked Li in a loud voice, trying to find out what was

happening. Worku intervened and tried to translate the workers' demands to his manager using wild gesticulations. The labourers were demanding a pay raise.

Li Hongde walked back to the office to discuss the issue with Liu Deye and the others. The workers had not agreed as to how high the wage increase should be: some said ETB 5, others demanded ETB 7, a few had asked for ETB 10 on top of their daily salaries. Liu grumbled but remained composed. He sat down on one of the chairs at the desk island. Wang Taihe was pacing up and down the office. Du Tianfu was standing outside the office with a cigarette in his mouth, staring off into the distance. Accountant Gu Diemeng was in China at the time, to celebrate Chinese New Year and recover from illness. After a while, Liu Deye and his team settled on the following arrangement: the diligent workers would receive ETB 3 on top of their daily salaries. The wages of the rest of the workers would remain the same. It was up to workers to decide if they wanted to stay or leave, Liu clarified. Worku was called to the office to pass on this message to the workers. A few minutes later four workers queued up in front of the office, and Worku summoned them inside, one after the other. The dogs were kept quiet by Wang Taihe. While waiting his turn, one worker in the queue started picking leaves off the lettuce and cabbage in the Chinese vegetable garden. The others followed, nibbling at the vegetables in an attempt to challenge the Chinese, who in turn tried not to take offense. The labourers were visibly upset by the situation. Once in the office, those who had decided to leave received their outstanding wages and were told to sign a termination of contract statement. They then left the asphalt plant site, bewildered.

Peace returned, until the early afternoon two days later, when I heard shouting coming from the office. Two men rushed out of the compound, chased by the dogs. A minute later Liu Deye came out of the office, muttering 'I almost kicked their buttocks'. He was waving a paper in his hand, which he let Worku and a few workers read. The labourers giggled, whereupon Liu started cursing. All he understood was that the letter, written in Tigrinya, had

summoned him to court. He was being sued by Mehari and Fikir, two workers who had regretted their decision to leave the plant. They had waited at the main gate the whole next morning in the hope that Golden Roads would take them back. Liu Deye had stood firm, and refused to reinstate the workers. The figure of ETB 5,700 in the text of the letter led him to guess that the complaint concerned a request for compensation, or a severance payment. Apart from that amount of money, he recognized two dates: the dates the workers stated they had started working for Golden Roads. According to their worker profiles the two young men had been with the company for eight and three months, respectively. According to the complaint both men had worked twenty months for Golden Roads (or RCE, in their understanding). Liu Deye asked me to accompany him to the court hearing as interpreter. I suggested he commission a lawyer instead, to no avail. When Liu insisted I come with him, I agreed, feeling obliged to reciprocate the generosity with which Liu and his crew had welcomed me in their camp and their daily lives. What I did not know was that accompanying Liu Deye would give me valuable insights into the litigation process and the way in which management-labour relations played out in *woreda* courts.

Liu was relatively familiar with court procedure, having dealt with it before. The first step was to set up a response to the charges in Tigrinya by visiting the legal writers, stationed in little wooden sheds on the slope of the town hill in Mehoni. The *woreda* administration, the police, and the prison were located at the top of the hill. At the centre of the hill stood a large umbrella tree (a *karwera* tree), which provided a small patch of shade, as well as an outdoor canteen next to the police station, both serving as gathering places for people who were either waiting to be assisted by one of the institutions or who were simply killing time. Raya Azebo Woreda Court was situated at the foot of the hill, on the south-west side, facing the compound of the contractor and the consultant, half a kilometre away. The Mehoni court consisted of three main buildings – one made of brick, the others of corrugated iron. Carved

wooden walking sticks leaned against the trees at the entrance to the court. The sticks belonged to farmers, often elderly, who had to come and go from court. A blue board hung above the gate, on which a yellow scale had been painted in white letters with the words, '*bet firdi woreda raya azebo*' ('Court of *Woreda* Raya Azebo'). Wooden benches stood in the open space outside, where people could wait.

One of the writers summoned us inside his wooden shack, which was fitted with a wobbly table, a law book, a pen, and two tiny stools: one for himself, one for his client. A legal writer could charge as much as ETB 50 – an amount that local people were likely able to haggle down significantly – and ETB 2 for two folded, striped A3 pages and ETB 1 for a sheet of carbon paper. The writer advised Liu to request that the charge be dismissed. Without waiting for his client to speak up one way or the other, the writer began penning this response to the complaint. It was not clear how the workers had calculated the damage restitution, he explained to Liu. Mehari and Fikir had not stated that the claim even concerned a severance payment. Were the case to be dismissed, Liu Deye would still have to pay ETB 290 to cover the litigation expenses, which, according to the writer, was an acceptable amount. Without any further debate – which was hardly possible in any case because of the language barrier – the writer polished off the response. Liu signed the document with his own name and the name of RCE, the contractor. He then took one copy to the courtroom, where one of the judges on duty put the paper in a faded pink file; this file, in turn, landed on a large pile of other pink files, each consisting of one case. A second copy of the response would go to Mehari and Fikir, to be handed over at the beginning of the hearing; and one was retained by Liu.

Liu Deye failed to appear at the first hearing. He had confused the dates, as had the court archivist, who had mistakenly summoned Liu to court on Tuesday instead of Monday morning. (I had sent Liu a text message to remind him of the hearing, but my Chinese

characters had produced nothing more than little squares on the screen of the locally purchased cell phone Liu had bought after his smart phone from China had been stolen.) When Liu Deye and I arrived late on the rescheduled date, we found a displeased judge at the front of the courtroom. Mehari and Fikir were sitting next to each other in the second row – silently, with their arms folded. The judge made a comment about Liu's failure to turn up at the first meeting then asked for the testimonies of both the workers and Liu Deye, which I delivered on his behalf, in English. Neither of the parties had brought witnesses. After the testimonies the judge asked to see the evidence. Liu handed over the worker profiles and the termination of employment statements. Lacking a translation in Tigrinya, the evidence turned out to be invalid.[50] Raya Azebo Woreda Court did not employ a translator. We were then referred to the district court in Maychew.

Liu was visibly irritated. He slouched in his chair, his facial expression betraying both anger and boredom. He had gone to the trouble of donning his good leather shoes, although he had refused to change his camouflage jacket for something neater. When the meeting ended, he walked slowly and silently out of the courtroom. Outside he cleared his throat and spat on the ground. He then proceeded to the project department back at the compound, to ask one of the local employees to translate the worker profiles and termination of employment statements into Tigrinya. Liu then returned to court with the documents and the translations, both of which disappeared into the same pink file. A week later Liu and I returned to court for the verdict. To our surprise, Liu won the case. The judge maintained that Mehari and Fikir had already ended their employment with the company by signing the termination of contract statement. They had received their salary up to the day of their resignation (or dismissal, in their understanding). Having done so, they were no longer entitled to ask for a severance payment. The signed statements had served as sound evidence on Liu's behalf, and so won

[50] All written and oral evidence in foreign languages was to be provided to the *woreda* courts with a translation in Tigrinya, the legal language in Tigray.

the case for management, even though the documents had been drawn up in languages that the workers did not comprehend.

Chinese employers in south-eastern Tigray seldom won lawsuits of this kind. Would the judge have come to the same verdict had I not been present? We had no way of knowing one way or the other. Liu Deye was astonished and glad, but remained calm. He did not say a word in the car on the way back to the asphalt plant. At dinner that evening he toasted to the positive outcome of the court case. Convinced that I was the reason Golden Roads had won the case, he also thanked me publicly.

The *woreda* courts and other actors involved in the litigation process, such as the professional legal writers, functioned as a channel for Ethiopian workers and their Chinese employers to voice their demands. The writers, in effect, acted as legal brokers. They rendered litigation accessible to lay townsfolk and farmers (and Chinese managers), as they 'translated' oral into written language, Amharic or English into Tigrinya, and colloquial language into legal language.[51] Assisting both plaintiffs and defendants, legal writers wrote up complaints as well as responses and were, as a result, able to exert significant influence over the litigation process. Other legal brokers were student interns, like Ephrem Abebe, who studied Law at Mekele University and spent the summer of 2012 working on the town hill in Mehoni, his hometown. He assisted farmers and uneducated citizens in their dealings with the police and the court, mostly free of charge or for a small tip. For Ephrem this was a way to gain practical experience in a professional environment in which he hoped to work after graduation. People like him made *woreda* courts accessible to everyone, in both social and financial terms. Like the judges in court, the legal writers mediated relations between Chinese employers and Ethiopian workers. Chinese management generally complied with court

[51] It is unclear how the high illiteracy rate was in this region. Enrolment rates for primary schools in Tigray are, at 92.1 per cent, quite high at present (albeit this rate is lower in rural areas). They have, however, been much lower in the past. A significant share of the older generation was illiterate. Moreover, the enrolment rate for secondary education is low: 36.6 per cent for 9th and 10th grade (15-16 years) and 8.9 per cent for 11th and 12th grade (17-18 years) (Ministry of Education 2012: 76).

verdicts and paid damages. Often only the threat of having to defend a case in court made employers compliant and willing to compromise and improve employment conditions of workers.

6.4 The role of *woreda* courts

Both the accessibility of *woreda* courts and the speed with which they dealt with civil and labour cases contributed to their growing role as a channel for negotiating and gradually advancing employment conditions. In the absence of active trade unions and other institutions or structures to support the workers' case, the *woreda* courts became, together with town authorities, which repeatedly called attention to bad practices of Chinese employers, *de facto* mediators in relations between Chinese employers and Ethiopian labourers. The *woreda* courts raised awareness among workers about labour rights and protections and forced Chinese employers to abide by the rule of law. Certainly, in this respect, *woreda* courts turned out to be much more effective than the ERA or their representatives on-site, who were, as the surveyor remarked, afraid of the Tigrayan people. The cases waged in court thus put into motion the gradual improvement of employment conditions of the Ethiopian work force, at least with respect to salary level, overtime hours, and severance payments.

Information on court cases and their outcomes spread rapidly through word of mouth. Workers across camps and companies informed each other about successful and less successful cases, and in this way, workers came to learn about their legal rights and protections. However, the surge in lawsuits was also partly the result of a wave of instigation fuelled by a mix of discontent and opportunism. In court Chinese employers became victims of their own labourers, as the ERA lawyer, Berihun Desta, had explained. Workers who had been successful in court – one could earn between ETB 5,000 and 15,000 damage restitution

per individual case – encouraged fellow workers to try their luck as well. A Chinese engineer of RCE put it: 'They just get hired to be fired, whereupon they can sue us in court'.

Labour disputes were fought exclusively on the *woreda* level. Neither the *kebele* courts, the lowest-level formal courts, nor the informal *shimagle*, a committee of elders that acted as arbiter in conflicts (e.g. arising from quarrels, land disputes, theft, violence, and even murders) was believed to have the authority to resolve inter-ethnic labour disputes. *Shimagle* were part of *mahabers*, religious associations that provided community support. The *shimagle* committee listened to each disputant and asked to present witnesses. It, however, lacked the power to enforce decisions, but it could delegate cases to *kebele* or *woreda* courts. Recognised legal institutions, *woreda* courts were permitted to deal with cases that involved claims up to ETB 500,000, according to Berihun Desta. Apart from appeals, labour cases seldom ended up in district or supreme courts. Appeals were rare. For labourers the costs of litigation, which included time and travel expenses to Maychew, would be considerable. This made the enterprise risky. Chinese commonly abandoned the idea of prolonging a court case with an appeal.

I am not aware of cases involving Chinese nationals who were brought before the *shimagle*. When a young Chinese man hit a ten-year-old boy by car, resulting in the boy's sustaining a bruised and swollen ankle, the family of the victim suggested presenting the case to the *shimagle*. In the end the parties came to a compromise on a compensation fee and did not need the *shimagle* to intervene – the traffic police, however, in a futile attempt to extract a lucrative bribe from the Chinese driver, had threatened to take the case to the *woreda* court. The parties agreed on ETB 7,000 in addition to the medical costs already paid for – but had yet to convince the head of the traffic police to refrain from a judicial process. ROW issues evolving from the annexation of land and property for the road, on the other hand, were exclusively dealt with by the district court in Maychew, or the Supreme Court in Mekele

when claims exceeded ETB 1 million. Falling under federal law, lawsuits arising from ROW disputes were filed by local residents and fought against the ERA, that is, the State.

Workers who had received the most schooling, or were most familiar with waged labour, typically made the step to court. Mehari, who had taken the initiative in the case described above, had finished the twelfth grade at the high school in Mehoni and aspired to university, yet dire straits kept him in his hometown. Having lost both parents, he had taken over the care of his little brother. At the asphalt plant Mehari had revealed himself a leader. Hard-working, full of initiative, and getting along well with all of his fellow workers, he had become a role model. His departure was a loss to the company and to the local work force, which arguably made Liu Deye even more upset with the situation. He had been sued by one of his best workers. After the court case I ran into Mehari again only once. He regretted the course events had taken and hoped to return to work at the plant. He asked me to convince Liu Deye to reinstate him. 'If only he had not caused so much trouble', Liu grumbled.

6.5 Antagonism of the local state

The role played by *woreda* courts and town administrations in mediating management-labour relations went against expatriate managers' ideas about the local state, ideas that were largely based on the Chinese model of the local developmental state. Since the start of the economic reforms in 1978, county- and municipal-level administrations in China have played a key role in boosting the local economy by supporting enterprises, especially those that bring investment from outside (Kim 2013). Permitted to retain and allocate a significant share of locally generated revenues, local governments have attempted to maximise revenues in order to spurt local growth (Zhu 2004). In order to understand the views of Chinese employers in south-eastern Tigray and their repudiation of the role played by *woreda* courts and local administrators in siding – as the employers perceived it – with the local work force, I will

present a brief account of the local developmental state in China and its emergence after state socialism.

Under the planned economy of Mao Zedong, local administrative units were required to turn over most revenues to the upper echelons of political power (Oi 1995: 1136). Since the reforms, a major objective of the Chinese government has been to spur incentives to increase production at the county and municipal level by transferring responsibility for development onto lower levels of government (Wu 2002: 1074). The government thus granted county- and municipal-level governments more autonomy over the generation and allocation of revenues, a process that has been termed 'fiscal decentralization' (Kung et al. 2013). Together with the implementation of the Household Responsibility System (colloquially referred to as '*da baogan*') introduced in 1981, which granted farmers land use rights and the autonomy to allocate their own labour, the fiscal reform prompted local governments to become 'economic actors' (Chen 1998: 1137). As a result, they were able to shift investments and resources from one enterprise to another, or use revenues for public works (Unger and Chan 1999), such as road building. County governments are said to have been the base of economic growth in China (Lin et al. 2013; Oi 1999; Zhou 1996). Fiscal decentralisation also put in motion the delegation of national SOEs to local governments. In the infrastructure sector, branches of SOEs came to fall under the authority of provincial, municipal, or county governments. Jianghe Construction is a case in point; it was transferred to the provincial government of Heilongjiang in the early 1980s.

However, once the central government saw budget revenues of local governments growing, it introduced a new tax system known as the Tax Sharing System (*fen shui zhi*) to secure at least a part of these revenues (Lin et al. 2013: 479). As a result of fiscal recentralisation and increasing tax levies, many local government-owned firms, such as Duyin Enterprise, were privatised with the enterprise reform (*qiye gaige*) in the 1990s and the

early 2000s. Duyin was founded in 1987 as a county level government-owned construction company based in Shouguang, Shandong. The company won its first big contract in 1998 when it took part in the construction of the Qing-Ji motorway (from *Qing*dao to *Ji*nan), which crossed the centre of Shouguang. During the enterprise reforms Duyin was sold and turned into a private enterprise. Chen Delin, Duyin's manager on the AH-project, estimated that in 2007 his company employed 170 to 180 people in China. Ethiopia was the first African country Duyin entered in that year, before Ghana in 2009, Senegal in 2011, and Uganda in 2012. At present the construction firm employs 230 people in China and 42 in Africa. Revenues made in Africa have been invested in China and vice versa.

The close cooperation between local governments and construction consortia in China is not only the result of a developing state keen to spur economic growth. Enterprises involved in road building have been mostly state-owned companies, comprising both local units authorised by provincial or municipal governments and central ministry-affiliated enterprises (Chen 1998: 715). Although the central government implemented project bidding for building contracts in 1984, competitive bidding (*gongkai zhaobiao*) in China has not been as 'public' ('*gongkai*') as the name suggests, due to the blurred lines between client and contractor and the extensive negotiations that take place between client and submitted bidders (ibid.: 717). Deng Chenghe, who initially came to Ethiopia with Jianghe Construction before he transferred to RCE, explained that the provincial government of Heilongjiang used to prioritise his former company in major provincial building projects. *Guanxi*, he asserted, played an important role in the allocation of construction contracts in China. This is also the reason that private construction enterprises cultivate ties with local officials up to the point that they become *de facto* state-owned companies. Jianghe has offices in the major cities in Heilongjiang. Deng Chenghe estimates that his company employs 12,000 people in China, of

whom 2,000 are employed by the local branch in his hometown Anda. However, Jianghe Enterprise saw revenues made in China dwindling, due to a decrease in projects.

With fiscal recentralisation, local governments retained one important source of tax revenue, namely business tax, consisting of taxes levied mainly on the real-estate and construction industries. The fiscal recentralisation caused a shift of focus from industrialisation to urbanisation (Kung et al. 2013). And as they were no longer able to extract revenues from SOEs and town and village enterprises (TVEs), local governments began cultivating new tax bases by attracting private (foreign) investment. Local officials, who wished to attract and hold onto overseas investment, developed tacit alliances with expatriate entrepreneurs operating on their soil (Solinger 1999: 280). Kim (2013) has demonstrated how expatriate managers of a Korean multinational garment corporation in Qingdao, Shandong province, maintained close cooperative ties with county government and village officials at the factory location. The latter offered tax benefits, assisted in the recruitment of workers, and was involved in the supervision of labour by patrolling the Chinese dormitories outside the factory premises (Kim 2013: 167-190). These ties were, as Kim shows, not unproblematic, as local officials expected favourable treatment in return. In an effort to increase foreign investment, local governments sometimes even signed away parts of their legal rights, such as taxation and higher-level corporate supervision, in order to guarantee the smooth operation of foreign enterprises.

In the eyes of the Chinese, Ethiopian counterparts did not seem to bother about foreign enterprises at all. In fact, they were seen as working *against* investment initiatives like those of the Chinese. This critique might seem ironic, given the strong case that Prime Minister Meles (2011) made for the developmental state in Africa. In poorly functioning economies, he argued, the neo-liberal paradigm cannot be fruitful. The developmental state would provide a better alternative. The developmental state as described by Meles is a state

that has accelerated development as its mission, which at the same time is its source of legitimacy. On the structural level, the developmental state, while retaining a degree of autonomy, attempts to guide the private sector with incentives and disincentives to make decisions in a manner that accelerates growth. Meles' analysis, however, focused on the central level of governance and did not elaborate on the role of local-level state institutions.

How then can Chinese management's perceived 'antagonism' of the local state in Tigray be explained? Antagonism derived at least in part from the alienation of *woreda* administrations from the road and its construction. The project road was a federal road and thus fell under the administration of the national road authorities (ERA). The Woreda Rural Road Offices (WRROs), which build and maintain exclusively DS-9 and DS-10 roads (earth roads with an average daily traffic of fewer than 25 vehicles; see table 1.1) had no say in the planning or design of the ring road. Neither could they decide on the allocation of resources or labour, nor intervene in various local issues that arose during construction. The WWROs were not only left out of the decision-making process but were also poorly informed. DS-9 and DS-10 roads are built using voluntary community labour. Before a *woreda* starts building a new rural road, its representatives go to the concerning *kebeles* to 'create awareness among residents of the use and value of the road', explained Halefom Nathnael, director of the Raya Alamata WRRO, and to ask communes to contribute manpower. The building of DS-9 and DS-10 roads was very much a communal enterprise. Although the veto remained with the *woreda* administration, *kebele* committees were incorporated in the decision-making process. In regard to federal roads like the project of this study, incentives from the central government failed to trickle down to the local level, chiefly due to a lack of communication (or neglect). This gap between central and local levels of governance suggests that local authorities might not have felt responsible for the Chinese road project, and so appeared indifferent.

Over the course of the project *woreda* administrations did, however, manage to push through a number of design revisions, such as the construction of a one-metre broad median in the town sections of Alamata and Mehoni, the provision of an asphalt layer on junctions with feeder roads, and the alteration of the vertical alignment of the Adiqey section – although not to an extent that local residents considered satisfying. General discontent with the lack of participation and say in decision-making processes translated into dissatisfaction with the road, in particular with the design and the quality of the construction work. Officials complained about the width and the colour of the asphalt, which was light rather than dark grey and so quickly came to look dirty. The sloppy work of the contractor was seen as proof of Chinese disinterest with the road and its quality. On 29 March, the resident engineer was standing on-site in the pouring rain when he received an emergency phone call from the director of ERA's Design and Build Department in Addis Ababa, who in turn had received a call from a regional government representative in Mekele, who had received a phone call from an Alamata town official, who had informed him that the newly laid asphalt of the Alamata section had been 'washed away'. The director was, naturally, concerned about this allegation, and had sought to verify the case. Nothing of these rumours turned out to be true. This incident, however, illustrates the implicit and at times explicit critique of local authorities on the road, including engineers. That said, the lack of cooperation on the part of town authorities can also be understood as a form of conscious resistance. The authorities' antagonism derived mainly from vaguely defined anti-Chinese sentiments, which in turn were largely founded on the disapproval of Chinese labour practices and the poor treatment of local residents.

That civic authorities themselves opted for the legal route caught Chinese by surprise. When a heavy trailer was unable to drive up a slope at kilometre 77 due to shifting sand, it slipped, slid down, and toppled, whereupon it blocked the road for more than a week. Wuhe

had been carrying out earth works at this section after construction blasting was finished, but they had left too little space for traffic to pass on a steep, slippery grade. Local officials notified the contractor that they considered taking the case to court. This incident was one of many. Civic authorities had often threatened the contractor with going to court if the traffic flow was curbed as a result of the construction work. (This would never happen in China, I was told by Chinese workers.) Such threats exacerbated Chinese perceptions of *woreda* courts and town administrations along the project road as uncooperative at best and hostile at worst. The Chinese felt victimised, not necessarily by their own work force, but by local officials. They blamed the ERA and the regional government in Mekele for inaction. 'Please tell ERA how difficult the locals make it for us to carry out our work. Mister [Hakim, head of the DB-department of ERA] still does not believe me', the project manager urged me, believing that an outsider's voice would find greater resonance. He felt that his complaints to the ERA met with no response. Not surprisingly, then, the Chinese felt they stood alone, and perceived antagonism from not only the *woreda* courts and town administrations but also local residents led to expressions of self-pity. Liu Deye, for one, felt that everyone should know about the hardships endured by Chinese in Africa. The next chapter is an exploration of this sense of victimisation and the ways in which it was expressed by Chinese migrants.

7. Narratives of Suffering

> We face a lot of difficulties. The *suzhi* of local people is so low that we have trouble managing them. Petrol theft is very serious. The labour law is partial towards local people. Local courts do not judge justly. We are entangled in lawsuits (*guansi chan shen*). Moreover, most of these lawsuits we lose. We are unable to speak with reason. There is no place to speak with reason. The economy of this country is very unstable. The exchange rate changes frequently and is very capricious. The risks our company faces are very high. We are often short of supplies and everywhere there are severe price hikes. It is impossible to budget costs. Because local people possess a lot of guns, safety is hazardous. The minds of black workers are rigid (*heigong naodai siban*). As soon as they are not able to think calmly, they shoot a gun (*tounao yi fare jiu kaiqiang*). It is a risky business for our company. In China it is impossible for individuals to carry guns. This way it is very safe. I have heard that in other companies black people have killed Chinese. (Xie Yang, in response to my questioning what obstacles he faced on his project in southern Ethiopia, 28 September 2011)

Xie Yang's tone of voice is telling of migrant narratives I recorded during my field research. Expressive of both sorrow and ire, these narratives sought to explain the limited success of Chinese infrastructure projects in Ethiopia. Pitying themselves and blaming the other – in particular his or her so-called natural disposition – Chinese migrants were in search of sympathy for the misfortunes they suffered in Ethiopia. Alluding to the felt hostility of the local community, narratives spoke of Ethiopian labourers and residents as thwarting, or worse, sabotaging Chinese goodwill.

But migrants' lamentations about their precarious situation in Ethiopia were linked to a larger development discourse. Causes of suffering were multifarious. Chinese workers conceived themselves as victims not only of Ethiopian labourers or residents but also of a shift in status of Chinese migrants in Africa. Since socialist aid projects have made way for infrastructure projects of a commercial and competitive nature, the status of Chinese workers in Africa has changed. In the past, Chinese migrants in Africa were celebrated at home as heroes, in particular by socialist state media. In recent news coverage, however, migrants are either fading away as agents of Sino-African relations, in favour of abstract processes in intercontinental trade and global economy as well as political flagship events, or they have been presented as victims, or as privateers. The public image of Chinese migrants' status has warped from that of brave and noble representatives of the nation into money-seeking individuals, or 'those friends who go to Africa to pan for gold' ('*qu feizhou taojin de pengyou*'). This shift in domestic media representation of Chinese nationals in Africa as well as the value of their accomplishments can be attributed to the decline in status of employment in Africa and, consequently, the decreased status of those who migrate there to work. Both shifts contributed to migrants' self-perception as victims.

The narratives of suffering I collected were closely linked to the migrants' rural backgrounds, due to which they had been compelled to migrate in the first place. Workers

presented the move to Africa as invincible means of overcoming social and financial pressures at home. Ironically, though, migrants' self-image as people from the village with a low level of *suzhi* and *wenhua* contradicted with the ways in which Chinese were perceived by Ethiopians, that is, as wealthy entrepreneurs. In contrast to their initial expectations, the migrants found that Ethiopians did not have mercy for their background as poor rural migrants who had temporarily suspended family life in China to invest in a better future in Africa. On the contrary, Chinese felt they were being maltreated, taken advantage of. They also felt a strong urge to talk about what they saw as the injustice being done to them. This chapter sheds light on the response of Chinese workers to opposition against their activities in south-eastern Tigray and to a development discourse that failed to recognise migrants as honest hard workers, as well as how this response shaped the Chinese migration experience. I am interested in the origins of suffering itself as well as the origin of discourse about suffering, which was prevalent in all aspects of daily life both on the construction site and in the residential compounds.

7.1 Speaking bitterness in Ethiopia

Zhidu is the online forum for Chinese worldwide where I found the following question posted by a student who was toying with the notion of going to Africa to work for a Chinese state-owned construction company:

> What I often heard is that the treatment (*daiyu*) of employees of large-scale building projects in Africa is very good. I came across a few of those friends who went to Africa to pan for gold (*taojin*) and bragged about it. I also believe that risks and hardship go hand-in-hand with huge opportunities. That is why I want to work in the African construction industry in the future. I don't know if this is wise, or that what I am saying makes sense, whether there are advantages compared to getting a job in China. How do I prepare to achieve this goal? (I am looking for a job with the overseas branch of a state-owned company rather than setting up a business myself.)
>
> I have tried to familiarise myself with the circumstances. [Chinese] construction companies are mainly state-owned enterprises like China Railway Group (*zhongtie*), China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (*zhongtu*), China Geo-Engineering Corporation (*zhongdi*), China Jiangsu International Group (*zhongjiang*), and so forth. Judging from my

> own quality (*zishen suzhi*), I think a positions [in one of these companies] should have a lot of prospects. I study mechanical engineering and I have two years of study still ahead of me to prepare myself for this adventure and the spirit of hardship (*chiku jingshen*). Since I do not have knowledge about local circumstances, I am looking for advice. Is it hard to get into a state-owned company? How do I go about [this venture]? (Anonymous, 9 July 2013)[52]

The student seems quite well-informed. He or she seems to know, for instance, that the *daiyu* of SOEs in Africa is better than the *daiyu* of private companies. The questioner reiterates the idea that one is expected to endure hardships in Africa. And those who go to Africa go for the money, he or she prompts, reflect the current image of Chinese migrants in Africa, in contrast to their counterparts from the socialist era. The response to the student's question, from a Chinese man who has lived in Africa over a long period of time, is equally telling. Liu Bo's response is an anecdotal yet representative account of the migration experience of Chinese in Africa.

> If you go to Africa, you have to mentally prepare for the following:
> 1. Have you ever thought of Malaria? This is the name of the most deadly disease in Africa. Since I am there I have seen many Chinese suffering from Malaria.
> 2. Africa is a place that even a lot of local Africans seek to escape (*taoli*). Can you imagine the feeling of being far removed from modern technology and civilisation (*wenming*)?
> 3. In general if you go to Africa, in terms of language and customs Chinese and locals are two different circles (*liang ge quanzi*). Can you imagine the feeling of loneliness when you are being surrounded by a black ocean (*heise haiyang*)?
> 4. If you live with Chinese in Africa, it is like living in custody (*zuo lao*). There is much gloominess in this, I have come across this very often. Would you be able to live in prison?
> 5. The majority of Chinese who left to [go to] Africa in my year, all returned [to Africa after the holidays]. There is [sic] only a few who persistently struggle (*kuku zhengzha*) at home. They endure their yearning for the little pressure of competition there is [in Africa]. The question is however does the time and the investment [of going to Africa] pay off?
> 6. You should not think that this is a place of blue skies and jade water (*lantian bishui*) where you can set your mind at rest and learn. To be frank, I have lived in Africa for a long time, but I have only seen those who after return[ing] take a long time to catch up with [the] rhythm of life in China.
> 7. You should not think that you can earn a lot of money in just a few years. Opportunities like these have become scarce.
> 8. You should not think that it is easy to put up a business. The local government is eager to crack down [on] Chinese who try to set up small businesses. Have you ever seen a stray dog (*liulanggou*)? The Chinese who put up small businesses in Africa are even more pitiful (*kelian*) than Africans who set up small businesses.
>
> Of course, if you are prepared for the above, you find in Africa:
> 1. Fresh and clean air, primitive life (*yuanshi de shenghuo*). And if you don't care, you can also get a black sister (*hei meimei*).

[52] www.zhihu.com/question/21308049, 20 August 2014.

2. If you are naturally open-minded and outgoing, Africa is heaven for you.
3. The market there is a blank space (*kongbai*). It is up to you to fill it out.
4. My hand is sour, haha.

It takes all kinds of persons to make a world (*yi zhong mi yang bai zhong ren*). Whether or not it is worth going, depends. For some people it is not suitable, for others it is. Like for people who are naturally adventurous, for those who would like to gamble with their lives, it would be brilliant. This type of person you see a lot in Africa. I have even seen martial arts experts and people who are unexpectedly well exercised. Although not as ferocious as in novels. They are not like idle people (*xianren*) who you can bully easily. With regard to life style, I know a former teacher who was the head of a Chinese school in Zambia. He loved the freedom he enjoyed in Africa. Right now he is preparing to get a certificate to act as [a] lawyer. For his job he has to travel a lot through Africa. And there is[are] a few friends I know, they have seen every corner of Africa. Now you see them, now you don't (*huyinhuxian*).

… (Liu Bo, 9 July 2013)

Most of the points addressed in Liu Bo's response I have touched upon previously, such as the perceived incompatibility of Chinese and local customs, the comparison of life in Africa to life in custody, the sheer loneliness, and the negative attitude of the local government in opposing Chinese ventures. Liu Bo uses the metaphor of the stray dog (or street dog) to describe the pitiful position of Chinese enterprises in Africa, which, he suggests, are at the mercy of local officials. Also, the image of Chinese in Africa as victims is conveyed. The portrayal of Africa by Liu is also reminiscent of what Piot (1999: 2) has termed the 'orientalization' of Africa in Western narratives, in which Africa is described as a place steeped in tradition, a place where economic development founders, where drought and tropical disease run rampant, and political conflicts and chaos are the norm.

The Chinese narratives of suffering I encountered were based on sentiments shared across social and occupational strata – from on-site foremen to high-level managers in head offices in Addis Ababa. Notice, for instance, in the opening quote to this chapter, that the manager, Xie Yang, uses the pronoun 'we' to refer to the Chinese in Ethiopia, or more broadly, in Africa. The pronoun indicates not only the shared dimension of the experience of suffering but also that Chinese were facing the same obstacles throughout Ethiopia. The idea

of a common 'enemy' helped to cultivate solidarity and was used in the promotion of Chineseness, but these particular narratives also expressed a yearning for understanding. This second characteristic, in which narrators speak of themselves as victims, are attempts to arouse empathy or sympathy for hardships endured from the arrival Ethiopia onwards. Xie Yang was, in his words, 'pushed to this country' ('*tui dao zhe ge guojia*') to save a road project that had been going badly over the course of two years. 'Now we have come, we should stay and take the rough with the smooth (*jilaizhi ze'anzhi*). I did not expect that carrying out projects in Ethiopia would be so difficult', he continues. 'But no matter what, we have to carry on. We cannot become army deserters, right?' Xie had seventeen years of work experience in the road-building sector in China. He had worked in Jiangsu, Hebei, Guangxi, and, most memorably, Hainan. Transplanting to Africa was an order (*mingling*), he emphasised, not a choice, as he had been dispatched by his company in China: 'I was appointed the post on my death bed (*linwei shouming*)'. For Xie Yang this mission was an opportunity not so much to see more of the world as to remain working in a sector he had come to love.

Other migrants expressed similar feelings, albeit in not so articulate a fashion. If they were not explicitly asked to move to Africa with their company, such as Xie Yang had been, they felt pushed by social and financial pressures and by competition at home. The attitude that one should 'take the rough with the smooth' was, however, quite common. Dealing with whatever circumstances migrants might confront was viewed as simply part of the migration experience, and minor alongside the ultimate goal of saving for an advance payment on a new flat or paying off a mortgage loan at home. Individual stories, then, were naturally linked to collective experience. Shared life stories (at home) and shared migratory experiences, both, connected migrants emotionally and socially and led to the collective dimension of narratives of suffering, expressed in terms such as 'we' or 'we Chinese'. Recall Liu Deye's request that

I inform *The New York Times* about the hardships that 'we Chinese' suffer in Africa. At the same time, the narrative itself – with its quasi-autonomous nature – gave a collective dimension to such experiences.

Whom exactly were narrators seeking to address? Migrants mostly shared their feelings of suffering with one another and with those, such as the Ethiopian consultant engineers or me, the foreign researcher, who were often, in one way or another, outsiders as well. As such, the narrator often gained a sympathetic (or benign) hearing. We, however, were not the narrator's intended audience. That audience included the 'locals' ('*dangdiren*') or 'black workers' ('*heigong*') featured in the narratives themselves – those who had ostensibly thwarted Chinese activities. Narratives of suffering, then, were addressed to the other, a point that cannot be overstated: Chinese migrants felt they could not have a dialogue with the very people the Chinese held responsible for their suffering. Consequently, the narratives were a vehicle for venting stories, feelings, and perspectives that could not be communicated to the offending parties in a common language. Had they shared a common language, perhaps genuine give-and-take could have occurred. Perhaps, too, the migrants would have been more sympathetic and less defensive (or offended). Who knows but that deep down they realised that the Tigrayan people were not the real culprits? The consultant engineers, on the other hand, came from the city (mostly Addis Ababa) and had a relatively detached perspective on the Chinese and their activities in south-eastern Tigray. As representatives of the central road authorities, the engineers also encountered problems with the local population, albeit of a different kind. They, too, had their narratives. Taken together, these narratives were attempts to express a collective feeling of suffering and were primarily aimed at creating greater public awareness about what respondents regarded as injustice.

A fourth characteristic was that migrant narratives juxtaposed conditions of victimisation with collective strength in enduring those conditions. Self-pity, then, was offset

by a sense of heroism. Toughness and perseverance, character traits that my respondents were keen to attribute to themselves, were celebrated. 'Chinese in Africa know how to eat bitterness (*hui chiku*)', was a common refrain. Ultimately, many held, they were able to overcome obstacles posed by the host community. An unpublished piece written by project manager Gu Hongyang,[53] with the title 'We Will Never Give Up Our Cohesive Capacity' ('*ningju liliang yong bu fangqi*'), reflects this attitude. Presented as a guide to road construction overseas, the piece expounds on the difficulties RCE faced over the course of the project, such as the challenges posed by ERA's design specifications, the construction of the infamous bridge crossing the seasonal Hara river at kilometre 3 – nicknamed the 'China-surprise bridge' due to the surprisingly long period (nearly four years) it took to complete the bridge – and the prolonged periods of rain in 2011. Gu Hongyang offers recommendations on how to overcome various types of adversities. One should act in unison, he tries to convince the reader. Referring to the popular 2007 Chinese movie *Assembly* ('*jijiehao*') about the Chinese Civil War, the project manager speaks of misfortune, combat, and ultimate victory. In order to overcome adversities one has 'to be bold in showing the sword' ('*ganyu liang jian*') and proceed with clear 'tactics' ('*zhanshu*'). Notably, however, 'at present everything has appeared to turn for the better. We have changed the bugle call to assemble that has not yet blown into [sic] a bugle call to attack ('*chongfenghao*') [into] a counter-attack in a decisive battle!' Primarily addressing his colleagues and party members in other parts of Ethiopia and in Beijing, Gu strikes a tone reminiscent of the communist propaganda discourse of another era. He depicts road construction overseas as a fight, and the challenges faced by local conditions and the local community as the enemy. But, he concludes optimistically, Chinese perseverance will overcome adversities and lead Chinese workers to victory.

[53] The project manager had sent me the piece at the start of my research, as a way of introducing me to the project and its course.

Migrant narratives of suffering are reminiscent of *suku*, or speaking bitterness, a practice promoted by the Communist Party during the socialist revolution and the period thereafter, when the government of the newly founded People's Republic of China pushed for land reforms (Rofel 1999: 137-149; Chan, Madsen and Unger 1992[1984]). *Suku* sessions, in which peasants were encouraged to speak up against their landlords, were organised and choreographed by the Party. The praxis was aimed at creating class consciousness and antagonism between classes. Peasants were made to believe they could overcome their oppression by speaking out about grief and suffering, and rectifying (*zhengfeng*) their oppressive situation. *Suku* sessions had the power to transform stories of personal suffering into collective narratives (Farquhar and Berry 2004: 116). Perry (2002, inspired by Hochschild 1979) has termed *suku* 'emotion work', as it was a method of mass mobilisation that spoke to shared sentiments. Of course, the praxis of *suku* of the socialist era is very different from the stories of suffering narrated by Chinese migrants in Africa. The former were choreographed and specifically used as a political instrument, whereas migrant narratives were spontaneous and initiated by the speakers themselves. The narrations nonetheless bore a political function, albeit implicitly and concealed. By speaking bitterness, migrants made subtle (and not so subtle) statements about their innocence in what they perceived as the partial failure of their activities in Ethiopia. The collective (rather than the individual) moral significance of the *suku* practice also reverberates in migrant narratives about hardships experienced in Ethiopia. Both discursive practices speak to collective exploitation. However, only the latter asks the audience for sympathy and understanding.

7.2 Fields full of African chrysanthemums: expectations and realities

Migrants' sense of being misunderstood and ill-treated was partly founded on the discrepancy between initial expectations and realities on the ground. Convinced of the goodwill nature of

their activities, migrants expected a cordial welcome by the local community. Nothing could be further from the truth, they found. Albeit recognising the business aspect of their endeavour, most respondents saw their projects in Ethiopia as philanthropic. If anything, their companies (or the tax payers in China) were suffering huge financial losses. The account of Jing Fang, 25 years old, might be illustrative of this discrepancy.

> My fiancé did not tell anything about his work. Before I came here, he told me how blue the sky was. He told me about the natural environment. He told me that the fields are full of African chrysanthemums (*feizhou ju*). The compound [he said] was surrounded by mountains. This is what he told me. But when I came here I found that the African chrysanthemums were not blossoming yet, only [those] next to the toilet. I felt deceived. I also asked him what sorts of fruit they have here. He told me you could get all sorts of fruit. In the end I discovered there is only papaya, which we grow ourselves, and bananas and mangos. If you want to eat apples, take a look at the price, extremely expensive, more than 10 CNY [per kilo]. I was thinking, so it turns out to be like this…'
>
> But it is still better than I imagined before I came here. I thought Ethiopia would be really poor – as in that people would not wear any clothes.… But after I came here I discovered it is better than I thought. Everybody wears clothes. But what surprised me is that everybody considers begging a normal thing (*zhengchang de shiqing*), whether in the city or in a small town. This does not give me a good feeling. From this very small place you can see that this country is not very good. The *suzhi* of people is not very high. They have made begging part of their lives (*ba qitao dangcheng shenghuo de yi bu fen*) instead of trying to struggle to get a job and make an [sic] own living (*ziji fendou zheng qian*). This leaves me [with] a bad impression. (Jing Fang, 21 May 2012)

Jing Fang had resigned from her job in Beijing to join her fiancé Zhao Yong, a contract manager at RCE, for half a year in Africa before they married in the summer of 2012. RCE had facilitated the couple's wish and employed Jing as personnel manager, a job that suited her well. She had a good command of English and the communication skills that many of her male colleagues lacked. Before her arrival in Ethiopia, Jing's expectations of life in Africa were double-edged. Her fiancé had drawn a rather positive image of the country, which was likely to win Jing over. On the other hand Jing's expectations had been low. She had not expected Africans to wear clothes (that is, those that covered the body in full). The price of apples was just a minor complaint. What disturbed Jing Fang most was the attitude of local people, who, in her eyes, begged instead of struggled to make a living. Her negative attitude

towards local Ethiopians was aggravated when her iPhone, iPad, and MacBook were all stolen from her room one night. She had left the window open just a crack, for air.

Chinese lower- and middle-level managers like Jing Fang had imagined Ethiopia to be stricken by poverty and deprivation, disease and chaos; they had imagined it to be a country that was anxiously awaiting Chinese assistance, to elevate itself from under-development. Like USAID and many other Western development agents, Chinese workers saw Ethiopian society as an abstract, neutral, and a real object of development (Mitchell 2002; Ferguson 1994; 2006). Official narratives have sought to distinguish Chinese development in Africa from Western aid by underscoring the mutual beneficial and collaborative nature of Sino-African relations. The principles of 'co-development' ('*gongtong fazhan*'), 'win-win cooperation' ('*huying huli hezuo*'), and 'friendly collaboration' ('*youhao hezuo*') between China and Africa promoted by politicians and diplomats – and endorsed by a significant number of scholars (Moyo 2010; Taylor 2009; W. He 2007; Li 2007) – simply masks the similarities in Chinese and Western approaches to, and experiences with, development in Africa. Neither the chasm between optimistic and, at times, presumptuous development narratives and realities faced on the ground is new, nor the frustration and resentment that followed. In fact, this chasm is a recurring theme in international development studies. Aid projects often do not work out as anticipated or presumed, as development policies – abstract, generalized, and simplistic – fail to fit highly complex and diverse societies (see among others Mitchell 2002; Crewe and Harrison 1998; Hobart 1993).

Ferguson (1994: 15) identifies two meanings of development. On the one hand, development is used to indicate an evolutionary process toward a modern, complex, civilised or capitalist society. On the other hand, development, as it came into vogue in the 1970s, is defined in terms of quality of life, linked to levels of welfare (or poverty) and life satisfaction. As such, the notion of development is no longer strictly historical and processual but also

moral. Chinese, too, deployed both meanings of development. Moreover, both meanings of the word were applied widely (e.g. to individuals, social groups, animals, lifeless objects, and abstract phenomena). Chinese commonly refer to China as a 'nation in the midst of development' ('*fazhan zhong guojia*'), suggesting that their country had not yet reached the stage of so-called 'developed nations' ('*fada guojia*') – a term used to refer to Western countries in Europe and North America. By stating that both China and Africa are develop-*ing* (italics mine) countries, Chinese officials and policy makers have attempted to conceal the apparent geo-political power asymmetry and to justify their development initiatives and rhetoric of mutual benefit and collaboration.

Three important parallels held between Chinese and (traditional) Western perspectives on development. First, both perspectives tended to perceive development as a linear process: a tendency reminiscent of the classic modernisation narrative (see among others Wallerstein 2011 [1974]; Frank 1966). Yet the ultimate cause of underdevelopment was not explained in structural terms, that is the country's or continent's place in the world system and its dependence on more developed centres, but in terms of agency, thus on the citizens' lack of effort to develop and improve the self and society. However, whereas the idea that one can 'bring' development to societies classified as underdeveloped has largely been abandoned by former Western proponents, the Chinese I studied were convinced that they, in contrast to the West, could assist Africa and teach about development – albeit ordinary workers faced with less rosy realities on the ground soon abandoned this conviction.

The second parallel was the assumption of the omniscient yet oblivious developer. Claiming superior knowledge over the people to be developed, the developer was in both discourses presented as an expert (Mitchell 2002). And in order to become an expert, the people to be developed were depicted as passive and ignorant. Arce and Long (2000: 37) have argued: 'the entire exercise [of developers] is to construct an objectifying optic, that

comes to resemble nothing more than a "neutral" engineer's tool-kit in which reality is presented as predictable and subject to control'. Hobart (1993: 16) introduces the concept of 'obliviance' to describe the attitude of actively ignoring alternative representations, while promoting one's own point of view. The omniscient yet oblivious developer presented supposedly objective problems as existing externally from and independent of people and failed to take into account local variations and contingencies. And much like Western developers, Chinese workers failed to recognise themselves as social and political agents. The third parallel, as I have shown, Chinese developers had, like their Western counterparts, the tendency to universalise human motivation. Reflecting a discourse of neo-classical economics, individuals were assumed to make rational decisions based primarily on economic interests (Crewe and Harrison 1998: 36). Chinese management's project of turning Ethiopian labourers into worker subjects, discussed in chapter four, was part and parcel of this process.

Moreover, Chinese regarded stagnating agricultural development as the result of Western aid, which had impeded the evolution of a capitalist spirit (or better: drive) in Africa. This is ironic, considering the neo-liberal nature of Western structural adjustment schemes, which had as their main objective the introduction of a 'market' in Africa. Western development assistance to Ethiopia had negatively affected the mentality of the Ethiopian, Chinese migrants argued. Their contention was that Westerners had taught Africans to beg. The attitude of the Ethiopians was seen as partly resulting from unconditional development aid from the West. And so poverty was not necessarily described as the traditional poverty of the peasantry (Mitchell 2002: 223); rather, it was the unfortunate product of Western development schemes. Notwithstanding, the Chinese employed a discourse quite similar to that of Western development initiatives.

Chinese workers thus interpreted resistance against the construction of roads as resistance against a higher cause: development. Convinced of the idea that roads herald economic growth and prosperity (Harvey and Knox 2012), Chinese were puzzled by the lack of gratitude on the part of local residents and the lack of cooperation by civic authorities. The Chinese can-do attitude and ideas reflected the belief, which Yan (Y. 2009) accords to the Chinese post-reform era, that one can change one's fate through ability and hard work. The meaning of the socialist catchphrase, 'regeneration through one's own efforts' ('*zili gengsheng*') had shifted from a dictum of socialist collectivism to a slogan of individualism in capitalist society. The same was true for the development (or regeneration) of society, which was perceived primarily as an accomplishment of its citizens. The present state of China, in migrants' eyes, was seen as the result of the blood, sweat, and tears of individuals motivated to improve their lives and society as a whole, not as the result of fortunate historical events, geographical circumstances, strong political leadership, or simply luck. In Chinese eyes Ethiopians lacked this development ethos. Only those who were prepared to engage with the road's potential would reap its benefits, the Chinese argued. By emphasising individual sacrifice, Chinese managers reflected the discourse of hardship that often goes with infrastructural change (Melly 2013). Road construction was thus cast as a development project that was brought about by temporary sacrifices made for the sake of the nation.

'The problem is that local people do not know what a decent road looks like', was a common refrain of Chinese managers, who were quick to point out that building techniques they used in Ethiopia were long outdated in China, as was the pace of the construction work. Road building in Ethiopia was compared with road building under Mao Zedong in the 1960s and 1970s. In China, the 306 metre-long bridge of the Addis Ababa Ring Road under construction at the time of my research would not have been called 'big bridge' as the Ethiopians preferred to call it, a Chinese mechanic told me with slight contempt. According

to Chinese standards the Tinishu Akaki Bridge, which became one of the longest bridges in Ethiopia and was the first bridge built with pre-stressing techniques, would be labelled as small. If Bole Road, one of the main arteries in Addis Ababa, constructed and upgraded by a Chinese contractor, were to run through any Chinese city, an engineer remarked, the traffic jam would run well past six, instead of four, o'clock. The school children who roamed the building sites in Addis Ababa after three o'clock, jumping from stone to stone, climbing on rocks and playing hide-and-seek in concrete pipes, would be in school until six or seven o'clock were they attending Chinese schools, explained an electrical engineer. They would not be walking with a single exercise book in hand, either, but with a rucksack full of books they could hardly carry.

In Chinese eyes local Ethiopians not only failed to grasp the social and economic benefits of the road but also the very philanthropic nature of the Chinese endeavour. Theft and defiance were, according to migrants, based on two fundamental misunderstandings: that the Chinese who venture to Africa are wealthy and that they take all revenues made in Africa back to China.

> I don't understand the local people at all.… [T]hey are stubborn in holding on to their own ideas. No matter how you try to explain, it does not help at all. He [the Ethiopian] just thinks he is right. I don't know if you also experienced this. Local people have this way of thinking (*siwei de fangshi*). And they are also xenophobic (*paiwai*). There are often people saying 'Chinese are like this and that'. They have one sentence, that Chinese enterprises come here to make money. In the eyes of the local people the Chinese are making a lot of money and walk off with it (*zhuangzou hen duo qian*). For example, I have tried to explain to locals, if a foreign enterprise comes here and sets up a factory, in reality it [the enterprise] does not come to plunder (*lüeduo*). It creates employment opportunities.… Take for instance a foreign shoe manufacturer. Surely it makes a bit of money, but [in] large part, workers, materials and so forth, he leaves in the country. We have not come here to confiscate (*qiangzou*) money. But they like to think that. They often say we are *alibabas*. (Zhou Deyi, 7 June 2012)

Zhou Deyi points at what he sees as a common misrecognition rooted in the failure of Ethiopians to understand (capitalist) economic principles. Businesses provide benefits to the local community, he explains, such as employment opportunities, materials (e.g. finished products such as shoes), and financial revenues, which, he states, largely remain in the

country in the form of salaries and tax payments. In Chinese eyes, Ethiopians viewed expatriate companies as evil, that is, as enterprises that plunder and confiscate wealth from the local community. Zhou complains that locals did not see the financial opportunities of capital investment, but that they perceived Chinese investors as *alibabas*, thieves. The capitalist rationale, stating the benefit of exchange-value over use-value, was presented as self-evident, while alternative explanations were waved aside and labelled irrational. Local Ethiopians were held to maintain completely different ways of thinking (*siwei de fangshi*), at odds with capitalist reasoning. Zhou's attitude is reminiscent of techno-political faith in the apparently universal rules of capitalist production (Mitchell 2002), which do not take into account the contingencies of people and nature and which deem other rationales arbitrary and relics of a non-capitalist past.

In his classic work, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*, Taussig (2010 [1980]) sheds light on the seemingly irrational attitude of workers new to modern wage labour. He demonstrates that their magical beliefs and religious rites give meaning to the harsh and oppressive realities of the capitalist mode of production (see also Nash 1993; 1972). 'The first reaction of such persons to their (usually forced) involvement in modern business enterprises as wage workers is frequently, if not universally, one of indifference to wage incentives and to the rationality that motivates *homo economicus*. This response has time and again frustrated capitalist entrepreneurs' (Taussig 2010[1980]: 18). Chinese managers echoed the rationale of *homo economicus* when they spoke about Ethiopian labourers and the ways in which Chinese expected them to behave. In a similar vein, Chinese rejected religious practices of workers, which were not only seen as distracting from work but also as contradicting the modern work attitude Chinese managers were promoting and, indeed, trying to model. Taussig's account offers insight into the potential motives of workers and residents involved in counter-discipline. The various forms of defiance can be understood

as attempts of workers to fight the system, not only the foreigners who had introduced it. The workers' efforts correspond to a struggle over competing value systems, not over resources, be they public property or personal possessions, alone. Chinese lower- and middle-level managers expected Ethiopian workers to act as rational economic agents who aimed to maximise their profit at all times against all costs. Unconditional cooperation with management was seen as leading to the highest gains and profits. Behaviour that subverted profit maximalisation, such as going to church or assisting in household chores during work time, was deemed irrational. Ethiopian workers, however, did not seem to listen. In turn, the fact that Chinese managers were preaching to an ostensibly deaf audience left them feeling defeated, and with the self-perception that it was they, not Ethiopians, who were the victims.

7.3 From heroes to victims: changing representations

Narratives of suffering also originated from a perceived lack of recognition from the home front. In the past, Chinese professionals in Africa had been celebrated as heroes, in particular by state media. Nowadays, ordinary migrants have either faded away as agents of Sino-African relations, in favour of abstract economic processes in trade and development and political leadership and flagship events, or the migrants are represented as self-interested individuals, merely going after money. As such, migrants have become victims of the capitalist development discourse that has replaced socialist state narratives. With this change in discourse, Chinese engineers and road builders have lost their honourable title of 'expert' ('*zhuanjia*'). Now Chinese migrants in Africa are often simply called wage workers (*dagongren*) or referred to by the more neutral term of migrants (*yimin*). The shift in the representation of Chinese nationals in Africa as well as the value of their accomplishments can be ascribed to two interrelated developments: the decline in status of employment in Africa and, as a direct result, the decline in status of those who migrate to Africa.

The People's Republic of China started dispatching goodwill missions of agricultural and medical experts as well as railway and motorway engineers to Africa beginning in the late 1950s. In fierce competition with Taiwan (The Republic of China) over the seat of China in the United Nations, the PRC government attempted to gain political support from newly liberated member states in Africa (Yu 1968; Cooley 1965). In contrast to socialist 'brother' countries such as the Soviet Union, and (to be) turned-socialist countries in Africa, such as Egypt, Guinea, Ghana, and Tanzania (Ethiopia remained loyal to the West until the revolution in 1974, after which the Derg introduced socialism), the 'Imperialist' West was not yet considered a migration destination. This situation changed in the decades following the opening-up of the People's Republic and the economic reforms, when Europe and North America became popular destinations of a wave of 'new migrants' ('*xin yimin*') (Xiang 2003; Nyíri 2001, 1999; Thunø 2001), chiefly consisting of entrepreneurs, professionals, and students. Africa declined in importance as a migration destination until the revival of Sino-African relations in the course of the 2000s.

Under Mao Zedong and in the early years of economic reform, engineers were 'chosen' to go to Africa. Seen as serving the nation abroad, such migrants enjoyed a respectable reputation. At the time employment was still allocated by the state, and Chinese citizens were accustomed to going wherever they were assigned a job. This system, termed 'unified distribution' ('*tongyi fenpei*'), greatly facilitated aid bureaux in recruiting competent professionals for projects overseas (Snow 1988: 147). State newspapers elevated Chinese experts in Africa to heroes by praising their courage and discipline. The following piece, excerpted from the *People's Liberation Army Newspaper* (*jiefangjun bao*), speaks about the Chinese who built the Freedom Railway running from the Zambian Copperbelt to Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, the most prestigious Chinese infrastructure project in Africa at the time.

> The Tanzanian, Zambian and Chinese workers and engineers of the railway project worked closely together and supported each other to shoulder the struggle. They endured the blazing

> sun, fought against wind and rains, lived in straw-made sheds, slept on the ground and used whatever methods to cope with life on the site. They constantly improved their construction plans. They fought a battle against the weather and the earth, fearless of hardship, fearless of fatigue, fearless of adversity, fearless of danger.… They slept next to their machinery and made every second count, struggled day and night to guarantee that the project would be a victory. (Jiefangjun Bao, 16 July 1976)

While Chinese workers were depicted as heroes, their work was presented as combat – notice the word choice (e.g. struggle, fight, battle, danger, and victory) – against a rather vaguely defined antagonist. The author typically draws on natural forces, such as the blazing sun, the wind, and the rain as metaphors of hardship, and accentuates the simplicity of life in Africa (e.g. straw-made sheds, sleeping on the ground), arguably to point out the relative under-development of the continent in comparison to communist China. The piece also stresses support between Chinese and African workers, depicting the two as comrades.

A comparable image is drawn in an article by Chen Man published in the state newspaper, *The People's Daily* (*renmin ribao*), in 1996, which reports on the China Road in Amhara regional state:

> The China Road is like a silver band flowing back and forth through the rift valley, leading around mountains and climbing over ridges. It runs over overhanging cliffs and strides across canyons. It makes me think of how Ethiopian friends described to me the Chinese construction workers at the time. They were not afraid of the hardship and the danger of high mountains and lofty mountain ranges. They split open the mountains and rocks (*pi shan kai shi*) at the 3000-metre-high flat roof, bearing the difficulties of breathing.
>
> They needed eight years of hardships (*jianxin*), eight years of blood and sweat to eventually complete the imposing beauty that the Ethiopian people nowadays can see. The Ethiopians admire her [the road], and are moved by her. At the time the leader of the country came over personally to inspect the road. He repeatedly expressed his gratitude to the Chinese ambassador Zhao Yuan at the time and the Chinese government. A local farmer said: 'Even a donkey cannot climb these sheer cliffs and precipitous rock faces (*xueyaqiaobi*), and a Chinese goes on top to build a road, could it be that they are sent by God?!' Of course, the Chinese were human beings, not Gods. Because of this road, Chinese experts paid the price of fresh blood and lives. Three experts found their eternal rest in foreign lands and places far away from their homeland. I admired the cemetery at the foot of the mountain on one side of the road. The gravestones have their names engraved. Their spirits are a symbol of Chinese-Ethiopian companionship (*youyi*). (Renmin Ribao, 1 December 1996)

Note how the forces of nature, such as mountains, cliffs, canyons, and rocks, and even the air pressure are depicted as antagonists; hardship is expressed in blood, sweat, and the sacrifice of life. The article has a patriotic ring to it, characteristic of Chinese state media even as late

as the 1990s. Only the Chinese construction workers are described as mortal beings, of flesh and blood, not their Ethiopian counterparts, who are left unmentioned.

A more recent article titled 'In Africa' ('*ren zai feizhou'*) in *The Southern Weekly* (*nanfang zhoumo*), a relatively critical newspaper popular among Chinese intellectuals, uses a slightly different tone to depict the lives of Chinese migrants in Africa. The author interviews a manager of the state oil company CNPC in Sudan, who says the following about his Chinese personnel:

> I truly admire the Chinese workers toiling abroad. They can bear hardships; hardships that people in China cannot imagine. So hot the weather, no place to stay, only to work hard on the construction site. They work seven days a week, every day more than ten hours. After coming back to the compound, they have to stay in a bunker, no fun. The most stressful thing is: at 5 in the dark they are picked up by car to work, to return at 11 o'clock in the evening. Like moving in circles; they work like machines. (Nanfang Zhoumo, 25 July 2007)

Although the manager sets out with a tone similar to that of the state media discourse discussed above – praising the mental and physical strength and perseverance of his personnel – his voice changes throughout the account, once the subject of his narrative shifts from 'them' (his staff members) to 'us' (his company or the Chinese in Africa in general):

> Sometimes we feel we cannot associate with local people very well. The local labour law is very thick and very complete (*kehou kequan*). The provisions included in the contracts with black people are very detailed (*henxi henxi*). Moreover, in case if something happens, the local trade union will take care of this and seeks trouble. It is not like in China. One time a black driver (*heiren siji*) skipped work (*kuanggong*). I did not give him his monthly salary. As a result he charged me in court. An oppositional faction of the government of South-Sudan sent the police to arrest me. But I was defended by a soldier from the northern government, who blocked his path. [We] do not dare to dismiss black people anymore. If he has a reason [and can defend himself] we owe him a one-year salary. We are at our wit's end with local workers who do not turn up at work. We are at a loss managing them. Absenteeism, for instance, if the Chinese person in charge raises [this issue] it does not count. He has to find two black persons who sign and leave a fingerprint (*huaya an shouyin*) who can testify that [the person in question] was absent from work, only then it is effective. But witnesses are hard to find. Black people do not want to act as witnesses. (Nanfang Zhoumo, 25 July 2007)

The suffering of Chinese workers described by the manager resembles the suffering of victims, instead of heroes combating adversities to accomplish ultimate victories. In this last section the respondent attempts to arouse a sense of commiseration and empathy rather than

admiration. His words fit well into the discourse of suffering respondents. In fact, the sentiments expressed by the CNPC manager employed in Sudan could well have been those expressed by my respondents. The account is realistic rather than idealistic. Granting Chinese in Africa a voice, the author demystifies the workers who in state media of earlier times often retained an air of mystery. The relationship between Chinese migrants and local Africans is addressed as problematic and layered, and no longer presented as one of true comradeship. On the whole, the article sounds a markedly different tone from that in either *The People's Liberation Army Newspaper* or *The People's Daily*.

The devaluation of migrant labour in Africa – likening it to common donkeywork rather than Herculean toil for the nation – was paralleled by the devaluation of the migrant and his or her *suzhi* in public discourse. As Liang Jun explained, Qinghua University graduates no longer wished to go to Africa. In fact, Chinese companies in search of certified engineers have to aim at lower-ranking colleges when recruiting new personnel for overseas projects. They could no longer seek recruits among the brightest students from the highest-ranking universities. Students from Chinese top universities would rather go to Europe or the United States than 'bear hardships in Africa' ('*zai feizhou chiku*'), I was told repeatedly. Associated with physical strain, work on the building site ranked lower than design work in the office. In fact, physical work in a place considered far from civilisation was even worse. Chinese workers in Ethiopia often joked about age and teased colleagues that they looked older than they were. The evil-doer was the African sun, which was thought to make one old very quickly. Dark, wrinkled skin was the main sign of premature aging due to work outdoors. Office work was considered only mentally straining, and reserved for the more gifted students.

Companies in Africa arguably sought to avoid the risk of investing in new employees who would only stay for a year or two. Therefore they aimed at recruiting 'village students'

(‘*nongcun daxuesheng*’) (He, 2011: 104; Xia, 2011: 57), students who were born and raised in the countryside. Employees from a rural background were thought to be better suited to bearing hardships. Due to the considerable investments made (e.g. expenses of flights, visas, and work permits) companies favoured long-term employment, and ‘village students’ were more likely to commit to their job for a longer period of time. Moreover, rural children had siblings, which suggested that parents would be more willing to let go of at least one child. Ye Yulin sarcastically described the ideal family situation of applicants for jobs in Africa: ‘You must have a younger or an older brother, a father who left home [for work], a mother who is ill, and your brother takes care of you at home’. The more vexed the situation and the greater the need for a stable income, the more likely parents (it was thought) would agree to their son’s going to Africa. Whereas former Chinese ‘experts’ in Africa were educated and came from urban regions, the arrival of engineers and foremen from low strata was perceived to lead to the devaluation of *suzhi*. And the devaluation of work in Africa resulted in the growing unpopularity of the continent as a migration destination, especially for the better-off and higher educated. Private and state-owned companies, in turn, responded to this trend.

The ability to ‘eat bitterness’ became one of the main requirements for a job in Africa, where both working and living environment were considered rough and tough. Only those with a thick skin were expected to endure life in Africa for a substantial period of time. Wages of migrants were, for instance, measured according to work and living conditions in specific regions, not according to revenues made in particular countries or the degree of technical difficulty of projects. The tougher (*jianku*) the circumstances, the higher the salary, Lian Zhengyou explained. He had earned between USD 1,700 and 1,800 per month during the two years he spent working on a road project in the Central African Republic between 2009 and 2011, around USD 200 more than in Ethiopia, where he occupied the same position as a draftsman. When a project road ran through a tropical rain forest the salary would be

higher than when it ran over cultivated fields. The availability of certain food stuffs was next to geographical conditions and climate in determining a worker's salary. Lian seldom ate pork in the Central African Republic. Chicken was also scarce. In Ethiopia, there was a wider variety of nourishment available, including fish and all sorts of sea food imported from Djibouti. But Africa in general was seen as a region of shortage and poverty, a region where one was expected to encounter hardships. As a result, those Chinese who lived in Africa were regarded as victims.

7.4 Pushed to Africa

Narratives of suffering were not merely based on quotidian experiences in south-eastern Tigray. They were tied to more general and deeper sentiments. Migrants pitied the very fact that they had to migrate to Africa. They were all clear about one thing: had they had the choice, they would have decided against the move altogether. Migrating to Africa was alternatively described as a mission, a temporary sacrifice, an investment for the future, or, at best, a career opportunity. My respondents commonly downplayed their own agency in the migration project. Most migrants contended that they had left China because they were financially forced to do so. Social pressure (*shehui yali*) at home was seen as the main evil. Young migrants in particular bemoaned the social pressure they felt when 'entering society' ('*zou shang shehui*'), when they could not rely on the financial support of kin, and so had to shoulder the burden themselves. Zhou Deyi, a 29-year-old accountant of RCE, put it so:

> In China there is a strong social pressure. There is no real social security (*shehui baozhang*). This means that if you are at the fringe of the crowd (*bianyuan renqun*), life is really quite difficult. That is why Chinese have a kind of feeling of insecurity. You have to do your utmost best to earn money. When you finally have the feeling you have accumulated a certain amount of money, only then you might feel secure.… Why do you think Chinese are so hesitant to spend money? A lot of people are so because of this reason. It is not because they do not want to spend money, that they do not wish to spend money, but because they want to leave themselves a secure life (*liu yidian shenghuo baozhang*).… A medical insurance only covers a small part [of the actual expenses]. And medical costs in China are high. Moreover, you want to make sure you buy a house before the house prices rise even further. I remember when I started my studies one square metre in Xi'an cost about 1,000 to 2,000 CNY. At the

> time I graduated one square metre cost already as much as 3,000 CNY. When I went back [to China] last time I discovered that a square metre cost more than 7,000 CNY. (Zhou Deyi, accountant, 7 June 2012)

Zhou Deyi draws a clear link between the search for a feeling of security and the purchase of a house. Residential real estate is a popular form of investment in China and is seen as a kind of life insurance. The Chinese catch-phrase 'only when you have a house, [do] you have a family' ('*you ge fangzi cai you ge jia*'), echoed by Zhou, touches on exactly this theme. The expression refers to a man's responsibility to care for his family. Yet, unable to look to kin for financial support, young male migrants are looking at a house purchase as a major burden. Zhou Deyi, for instance, grew up in rural Jiangsu, where his parents earned a living from fish breeding, a fairly unstable source of income. When Zhou went to university in Xi'an, his father moved to Yangzhou to take up wage work with a home furnishing company. Zhou's mother stayed behind on their patch of land to look after her husband's aging parents along with the ducks and chickens. When Zhou moved to Africa, his father returned from Yangzhou to accept a job at an enterprise that made street lights, close to their home village. The main reason Zhou migrated was to secure a higher salary. During his 2009 summer holidays, 2009 Zhou bought a flat in Yangzhou for CNY 4,000/m.² 'But', he sighed, 'now I have a house, but still no wife' – yet another social pressure young Chinese men incur when entering society.

Zhou Deyi's sentiments were shared by the older generation of migrants to which 43-year-old materials engineer Fang Lei belonged: 'If we don't have a sense of security ('*anquangan*'), how can we live? In China…only if you have a major talent, you can distinguish yourself. But there are very few outstanding people. The majority of the people belong to the remaining category. They belong to the commoners ('*putong ren*')'. And commoners, Fang argued, will always be in search of security. 'In fact everything is about earning a bit of money', Zhou explained to me.

> If you give your employees the same salary as employees in China, nobody would come here [to Africa]. Right? If I could earn an equal salary in China, why would I live hardships [sic] far away in a remote place (*xinku wanli zhaozhao*)? What would I come and do here[,] so far away from home?
>
> MD: what about interest or curiosity?
>
> Curiosity? Students maybe, right after graduation. They may be curious. But if they have to enter society (*zou shang shehui*), this won't be the case. In the current state of the country (*guoqing*) in China there is no social security. Ordinary people lack a sense of security. Apart from those who have a lot of money. They are in a better position. Maybe the child of a rich family might not have to think about this and does not have this pressure. I am talking about regular families (*yiban de jiating*). (Zhou Deyi, 7 June 2012)

Both Fang Lei and Zhou Deyi identify the lack of a sense of security as shared by the majority of Chinese. Zhou attributes these sentiments to the current state of the country (*guoqing*), with which he arguably means the shift away from socialism – or the introduction of capitalist characteristics into socialism. Socialism in the cities guaranteed workers life-long welfare benefits. Socialism in the countryside was built on a strong network of social support. The processes of privatisation and commoditisation were seen by migrants as impairing both urban and rural safety nets.

The sense of insecurity, however, hit hardest those who tried to exit (climb out from under) a rural background. The majority of Chinese migrants in south-eastern Tigray, especially the young and educated, belonged to this group. Unable to rely on extended kin and village networks and lacking influential connections in the city, this social group was characterised by a certain social disentanglement, which was exacerbated by migration to Africa. Money was presented as the primary means of relieving oneself of a feeling of insecurity – unless one possessed an extraordinary talent, which migrants contended they did not.

> They [Ethiopians] think we Chinese have a lot of money, that we do not lack a tiny little bit (*bu cha zhe me yi dian dian*). I don't know what they think about us building this road. They think we come from outside (*women shi wailaide*), so they steal things from us. Like 'what we can steal, we steal'. If you think about it, if you compare our cloth[e]s with theirs, ours look very expensive. But what can we do? Apart from protecting ourselves, what can we do? We live in their environment. You can only do what you have to do. [Do you think] it makes sense to report this [theft] to the police? I think I don't have to explain this to you. (Peng Gaofei, 31 May 2012)

The image of wealthy Chinese migrants prevalent among Ethiopians directly conflicted with the self-image of migrants, who considered themselves members of the bottom of (urban) society in China. In China, migrants had been subject to various discriminatory policies implemented in the 1990s, particularly under Jiang Zemin, from 1993 to 2003 (see Lora-Wainwright 2013), that had deepened the social and economic rift between city and countryside, and these were in addition to the restrictions the *hukou*-system had imposed. Temporary migration was a way to relieve, at least temporarily, the socio-economic pressure reinforced by a rural background, by offering young migrant men the opportunity to earn their first barrel of gold (*di yi tong jin*). With this starter capital they could buy a house – commonly a flat in a high-rise in the big city – and the freedom to do what they actually wanted to do upon return to China.

Returning to China, though, had become more difficult. The saturated infrastructure-building industry had left few job openings for an increasing number of engineering graduates and redundant employees (those who were *xiagang*, that is, without work yet not without a employer), let alone for returnees from overseas projects. Prior to their annual return-trip to China for their holiday, most of my respondents had convinced me that *this* time they would stay in China. And yet they returned – all of them. Some had looked for employment opportunities at home, but when asked why they had come back to Africa in the end, they contended that they did not want to compromise, and earn a lower salary back home. Deng Chenghe tried to explain why Chinese migrants would remain in Africa four, five, six years or more than they had intended.

> On the phone my wife used to say 'please come back'. In fact my wife and my family are very poor. The life we enjoy now, she never would have thought we would come to enjoy. My salary abroad is quite high.… Initially my wife said to me: 'Alright. Go. Maybe for one or two years, after that we have accumulated some savings and we don't have to live in financial straits (*jieju*) and poverty (*pinkun*) anymore'. She and I believed this at the time. I remember when I was in Ethiopia for two months, it was Chinese New Year. I received my salary of the first two, three months, which was what I would normally earn in one year. And so my wife

> called me, saying: 'Come back quickly, we already have a lot of money, you don't have to work abroad anymore!' In fact, she is easily satisfied with our situation. She doesn't think about the long term, about our child's future, or about our parents' future. She has not thought about this. She is already satisfied. In fact, she was already satisfied with our situation four years ago. I have been here for five years. Our life is not bad. Although our family is not rich, we can live a good life. If I quit my job and go back home, she would be really happy and supportive. She does not have a greedy heart (*tanlan de xin*). I find this very hard. She is not like: 'Today I have fifty, tomorrow I want to earn hundred'. She does not have this.… But I do have this. If I don't think about the life of tomorrow, I might regret what I did today. She says that I am afraid what tomorrow will bring, or worried. Chinese men are all like this. If tomorrow something happens, and I cannot solve this [problem], that would be a very stupid and cowardly performance (*wonang de biaoxian*) [of me]. (Deng Chenghe, 24 May 2012)

Now his wife and he do not talk about his return anymore, Deng Chenghe said. If the question loomed in Skype conversations, they quickly changed topics. Notice the way in which Deng describes his previous situation in China. Before he moved to Africa his family lived, according to him, in financial straits and poverty. This was no longer the case, he said, describing his life at present as 'not bad'. Again, the male responsibility for the family, including his filial duties, comes to the fore.

Deng Chenghe was 33 years old, with a wife and child in China. Improved living conditions at home as a result of his higher migrant salary did not, however, satisfy Deng Chenghe – during his years in Ethiopia, he had bought two properties in his hometown of Anda, Heilongjiang. His urge to accumulate wealth was irresistible and managed to separate him from what was most important in his life: his family. Nevertheless, Deng contended, his hopes for the future were modest. 'I do not have big dreams or aspirations anymore. I only hope to continue working for a bit and then catch up with family life. The happiness of my family, including my parents, wife, and kid, is the only thing I care about'. This expression of modest aspirations for the future conflicted with the urge towards wealth creation in the narratives of other migrants. The majority reckoned they would spend only two, at most, three years in Ethiopia, and yet all the migrants I met ended up staying year after year. 'Dad, when will you go back to your Ethiopia (*ni de aisaiebiya*)?' Deng's son had asked him on his previous trip home to China for the annual holidays. 'When I come back home, so suddenly, I

am like a stranger in the house. He is not used to me anymore'. The estrangement from his child was Deng's greatest fear. When one of Wuhe's employees returned to China after having spent three and a half years in Ethiopia uninterruptedly, his 11-year-old son no longer recognised his father. Even so, Deng's fear of estrangement from his son was not strong enough to draw him home. In fact, in Deng's reasoning, it was *because* of his child's future that he remained in Ethiopia. Deng wanted to prevent his child becoming a victim of a poor rural background and thus also having to go to Africa to work for a boss (*dagong*). This dynamic explains the strong objection migrant fathers had to their family members coming to Africa. 'Africa is not an environment for women or children', many contended.

Factors that led to a sense of suffering were related to the perceived hostility of the host society and the financial straits that had made Chinese migrants move to Ethiopia in the first place, not so much to the hardships related to work and life in Africa, such as the simple living conditions in the camps, the shortage of certain food stuffs, the lack of freedom and KTV, the high prices of apples, and the inability to consume – 'there is no place to spend money' ('*mei difang hua qian*') was a repeated complaint. It was the migrants' position in a larger context, including the separation from kin, their precarious condition in Ethiopia, and the pressures stemming from their own socio-economic background that provoked a sense of self-pity. The expression of sentiments of distress and hardship by individual migrants contributed to representations of the self and to the self as part of a group that was suffering the same fate. Sentiments of suffering were shared, as were the narratives about that suffering. The migrants' position in a discourse of development aggravated Chinese perceptions of themselves as victims. Moreover, there was no way to bridge the chasm that prevailed between stereotypes about China as a powerful actor in the developing world, and the Chinese expatriates who were deeply affected by stereotypes, good and bad, of China's power.

By expressing sentiments of suffering, migrants sought sympathy for their complex situations and their victimhood at home as much as abroad. In Africa, the suffering of Chinese of a lower background could finally be expressed in a way that it could not in their home society. Suffering, then, could become a topic of discussion as migrants found an outlet for the prevailing social and economic pressures exerted on them at home by blaming someone else, abroad. At times, Chinese workers spoke enviously of Ethiopians, whom they saw as content and easily satisfied – recall the grader operator's statement that his workers were happy as soon as their bellies were full. Ethiopians were seen as not having much to worry about. At the same time, Chinese migrants' hard work had won them more material comforts than the Ethiopians enjoyed. In that, capitalism was still 'fair'. Whether it had bought the Chinese peace of mind as well was uncertain.

8. Conclusion

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

Back in his thirties Biserat had fought for the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) against the Derg regime. He had come from Dedebit in Tigray, where the TPLF had established their first military base. 'It was a dark age', he recounted. According to his memory, road construction in Ethiopia had only begun with the establishment of the current government. Biserat knew a remarkable amount about road building, and I asked if he had been an engineer. 'At my age you know a little bit of everything', was his modest answer. In fact, during the TPLF's long march south, which ended with the seizure of the capital city in 1991, Biserat had supervised road construction, which involved building passages and corridors for the militia. As the main thoroughfares were occupied by the Derg, the TPLF had to clear its own way through the inhospitable mountainous terrain of Tigray and Amhara, using confiscated dozers, excavators, and dump trucks. Biserat enjoyed talking about past times. One time he was interrupted by a local worker, gasping from running up the slope. The worker pointed at the old man's water bottle. Biserat told him to fetch water from the tap at his house. 'These boys are poor', sighed Biserat, 'like the Italian engineer, who has come to Africa to work'. 'And what about the Chinese?' I asked. 'The whole world is in crisis. Europe, America, even Africa; except for China. The Chinese are not poor. They are 1.4 billion and all have something to eat'. Biserat, if anything, was thankful to the Chinese and spoke enthusiastically about infrastructure development in his area of Addis Ababa. Nonetheless, he fostered hope that the Chinese company working on Addis Ababa's roads would soon be replaced by a local enterprise. He introduced me to his 18-year-old son, who was in his last year of high school and who dreamt of becoming a civil engineer. 'Do you think the Chinese exert any political influence on this country?' I asked one day. 'I do not think so. They are building roads. Look at the Chinese busy here. Look at Mister Ding. Do you think he has time to get himself involved in politics?'

One of the objectives of this study has been to offer insight into the lives of ordinary Chinese workers in Ethiopia, such as Mister Ding, who gave sense and shape to the much-debated engagement of China with Africa. Mundane actions of Chinese and their interactions with Ethiopian workers on and off the construction site cast a different light on this engagement. They reveal the complex, diverse, and contradictory nature of an encounter that may, at first glance and from a distance, appear straightforward and uniform. At least, it has been presented as such in media and public discourse. China (whatever China may be) has often been presented as a super power that sets the terms and conditions for its cooperation with Africa (whatever Africa may be). In the West we have described Chinese influence in Africa either as an abstract force, a structure that is being imposed on local practices, or we have accorded abstract concepts (e.g. 'China' or 'Africa') human agency. The tone of the debate on Chinese engagement with Africa has been politically charged, sensationalist, and judgemental – sometimes outright accusatory – in the West, and optimistic, and at times opportunistic, in the East. Yet, political and popular debates in the West as well as the East have cast a shadow over the individuals who actually *live* the China-in-Africa experience, and who translate ideas and ideals into practice.

Biserat Mengesha put his finger on the discrepancy discussed in this study – that between development narratives about China's engagement with Africa and mundane experiences of ordinary Chinese, like the workers he saw on the construction site in front of his house. Chinese development narratives, informed by state rhetoric of 'co-development' ('*gongtong fazhan*'), 'win-win cooperation' ('*huying huli hezuo*'), and 'friendly collaboration' ('*youhao hezuo*'), and embedded in experiences with domestic development, did, however, colour migrants' expectations of Ethiopian society and their work abroad. But expectations remained unmet. Initial beliefs only faintly corresponded with realities faced on the ground. Disappointment led to resentment and frustration on the part of Chinese workers and

provoked emotions linked directly to their position as: upwardly mobile Chinese citizens struggling with their rural background; workers at the bottom of a highly differentiated corporate hierarchy; successors of Chinese migrants in Africa who had enjoyed a respectable reputation at home – a reputation that current migrants sense they are about to lose – and, last but not least, citizens of a 'developing' nation who were acutely aware of their country's status in the world as superior to Africa and inferior to the West. The lives of Chinese workers in Ethiopia and their ideas about the host society must be understood within this contextual frame.

Chinese workers, the majority of whom hailed from the countryside, described migration to Africa variously as a mission, a temporary sacrifice, a future-oriented investment, or, occasionally, a career opportunity. Much like members of their generation at home, Chinese workers were eager to attain an urban middle-class status, driven as they were by a longing for upward social mobility and the search for financial security. Motivations for migration were, by contrast, mundane and pragmatic rather than romantic or ideological, which in turn shaped migrants' perspectives of the host society as well as other facets of their life and work abroad. The intricate link between migrants' economic situation before and after migration, as well as their migratory experience, has been understated in migration research, which tends to focus on push-and-pull factors, or on the interaction between migrants and the host society. What is more, the current wave of Chinese migration to Africa is distinct in that migrants temporarily step down to climb up the social ladder in their home country, with the aim of improving the self and the chances of the next generation.

Given the urge to improve their own lives and those of their kin, the notion of self-development was central to the ethos of Chinese workers and, as I have indicated, one of the ideas that they had transported abroad. Entrenched in Deng Xiaoping's reformist ideology of the end 1970s and 1980s and more than three decades of rapid economic growth,

commitment to self-development was seen as a responsibility, almost as a duty, of individual citizens. As lower- and middle-level managers, Chinese tried transmitting this idea to Ethiopian labourers, who, nonetheless, failed to respond to monetary incentives. In the eyes of the Chinese, this relative indifference made the Ethiopians appear indolent and lacking in a sense of urgency – at least the kind of urgency that had been characteristic of peasant workers in China. But what Chinese workers saw as the natural disposition of Ethiopian workers was in fact largely a response to asymmetrical power relations, that is, part of a structure, rather than a habit.

Not only did Chinese managers expect the other to commit to self-development, they also trusted (subordinate) compatriots to commit to the same ideal. In Ethiopia the notions of *suzhi* and *wenhua*– concepts by which a wide range of human characteristics (amongst others commitment to self-development) were measured – were deployed in value judgements about Chinese colleagues, who commented or corrected each other on their behaviour and actions. The idea that development takes (or should take) place simultaneously was another key idea transported from China and deployed in interactions with Ethiopians. Chinese workers justified their actions and decisions as managers and as developers, by example. The protection of the reputation (*xingxiang*) of the knowledgeable, hard-working, disciplined Chinese, who had a high level of *suzhi* and who possessed *wenhua* was therefore crucial. Maintaining a good image was moreover important for retaining the ethnic categories that underpinned the relations of production and power. At risk was the muddling of boundaries between those who had *suzhi* and *wenhua* and those who did not, in other words, the boundaries between Chinese managers who exercised control over the means of production and had access to (exclusive) knowledge of development, and the managed, Ethiopian workers who sold their labour and were expected to buy into Chinese ideas about development. Certain members of the Chinese community, in particular foremen of private

subcontractors, were held to misrepresent, or worse, contaminate the essence of what it meant to be Chinese. The civilising offensive of the project management, at first glance aimed at the Ethiopian worker, was therefore at the same time targeted at Chinese foremen of a low class, and low *suzhi*.

Development moreover was perceived as a simultaneous effort of the state and the individual, in which both were expected to make sacrifices for a higher (mutual) cause. Development was seen as the result of a collaborative and reciprocal relation between a strong pro-development state and entrepreneurial citizens. This intimate relationship between the party-state and individual citizens, as well as their mutual commitment to development, had grown out of the economic reforms in which Chinese citizens were set free to make their own decisions – chiefly in the economic realm – while the party-state retained control and oversight. Both the local and central state and the individual were expected to take risks and to invest in improving themselves and society. This commitment to entrepreneurialism, albeit in a contained form, was a third key idea that Chinese workers had transported abroad.

Chinese workers occupied a low stratum not only in Chinese society but also in a highly differentiated corporate hierarchy, which was characterised by a multi-level subcontracting system. Workers were relegated to the bottom of the hierarchy, and treated as such. In China migrants had been *dagongren*, or the children of *dagongren*: workers from the countryside, who had faced tough employment conditions when they arrived in Chinese cities, such as substandard wages, long work days, disciplinary violence, and a pervasive lack of legal protection. *Dagong* was associated with the commodification of labour – labour that can be dismissed at will and replaced by anyone who is willing to sell his or her labour for a lower price. But despite their own experiences with *dagong* life, Chinese migrants fostered similar expectations of Ethiopian labourers. The ways in which Chinese management

attempted to mould Ethiopian workers into industrial worker subjects were reminiscent of the formation of *dagongren* in mainland China.

Much has been written about *dagongren* in China, particularly about the female gender, the *dagongmei* employed on shop floors (Chang 2009; Fu 2009; Pun 2005; 1999; Lee 1998) and in domestic service (Hu 2011; Yan 2008). The male gender, the *dagongzai* primarily occupied in the construction industry, has received much less attention (notable exceptions are Pun and Lu 2010b and Solinger 1999). This is surprising, considering that about thirty per cent of all migrants from the countryside work in the construction industry in China (Pun and Lu 2010b: 144). With this study, I hope to have contributed to a better understanding of masculine migrant worlds. My field setting was, one might argue, hyper-masculine, as almost no (Chinese) women were present – in contrast, I was told, to worker compounds on construction sites in China.

In order to understand Chinese workers' ideas, motivations, and actions, I have linked development in Africa with development in China. A comparison between management in factories or on building sites in China and with Chinese management on Ethiopian building sites proves that labour relations were not based on ethnic distinction alone. Strikingly similar processes of discrimination occurred in China between urban and rural employees, and between permanent and temporary workers. Labour-management relations in south-eastern Tigray were coloured by multiple cross-cutting factors. Relations were underpinned by class oppression, and by educational and regional divisions as much by ethnic (or national) discrimination. What is more, judgements by Chinese lower- and middle-level managers of their Ethiopian workers were not so much based on race in the taxonomic sense, as in the differentiation of human groups defined by phenotype, that is, observable traits (e.g. skin colour), but on education as expressed by the Chinese concepts of *suzhi* and *wenhua*. I endorse Wu and Liu's (2012) call to bring class back into the study of international migration.

At present, such studies tend to underscore shared characteristics, such as ethnic background, and to forget about divergent interests tied to class. Moreover, co-ethnicity, common cultural backgrounds, and geographical origins have often been stereotyped and overrated as characteristics of Chinese migrant communities abroad (ibid.: 15). The focus on co-ethnicity, which is held to create familiarity and solidarity, also veils internal divisions. The Chinese migrant community I studied was heterogeneous, as were the outcomes of their encounter with the local community. Chinese social practices were not simply imposed upon local systems but rather interacted with them to create 'reciprocally determined transformations' (Comaroff 1985: 10), involving processes of accommodation, adaptation, and resistance.

Chinese workers, thirdly, tried to come to grips with their position in a historical context of Sino-African relations. The agricultural, railway, and motorway engineers dispatched to Africa under Mao Zedong had been celebrated as noble and brave representatives of the nation. More recent public discourse, however, has depicted Chinese workers as little more than money-seekers. This shift in the representation of Chinese migrants in Africa, as well as the value of their accomplishments, can be attributed to the decrease in status of employment in Africa (in the eyes of Chinese at home) and, as a result, the decline in status of those who migrate. Both shifts contributed to migrants' self-perception as victims. This feeling of victimisation has been reinforced by the supposed misfortune – that is, 'trouble' with the local community – migrants have endured in Ethiopia. 'You Westerners have status in Africa. Africans look down upon us', grader operator Li once remarked. And yet, at the same time Chinese workers derived confidence from China's place in the world, relating enthusiastically and proudly how developed their country was. Comparing infrastructure in China and Africa made the former look advanced. The site engineer's quip that if Bole Road in Addis Ababa were to run through a Chinese city, the traffic jam would last well past six o'clock underscores the industriousness of Chinese. And

yet, while the statement may have symbolised a sense of urgency to catch up with the West, it also expressed a sense of satisfaction with how well Chinese society was doing on its own.

Chinese workers took pride in their reputation as disciplined workers. But the three notions inspired by development at home and transported abroad – the ideas of self-development, simultaneous development, and contained entrepreneurialism – led to expectations that remained unmet on construction sites in Ethiopia. Chinese lower- and middle-level managers failed (in their own eyes) to educate Ethiopian labourers and teach them about development. This sense of failure led to sentiments of suffering and self-pity. Chinese managers, however, were disappointed not only with Ethiopian labourers but also with the local state, which failed to take up its role as the teacher of social mores and as the development agent, creating a business environment that was attractive for foreign companies. Unlike the Chinese local developmental state, on which Chinese ideas and expectations were largely modelled, the local state in Tigray remained passive and lax at best, uncooperative and thwarting at worst. Disappointment with Ethiopian labourers and officials, though, was also a trope for frustrations at a deeper level. Chinese workers pitied the very fact that they were, as they said, 'pushed' to Africa. As peasant workers at home, they had belonged to the lower end of Chinese society, and had faced the ugly realities of forced economic growth. In China, their work was not regarded very highly; nor, as it turned out, was their self-sacrifice abroad, in Ethiopia.

Appendices

APPENDIX 1.

Invitation to Bid[54]

Issued by Ethiopian Roads Authority
Bid Doc. Price Birr 450.00
Published Date May 24, 2007
Opening Date July 24, 2007
Bid Category Road Upgrading Project

1. The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) has allocated sufficient budget toward the cot of Design and Construction of Almata-Mehoni Hewane Road Upgrading Project (about 114 Km. Long existing gravel road) and intends to apply part of this budget to payments under this contract.
   The road is located in Southern Zone of Tigray Regional State in Northern Ethiopia and links the three Woredas, Almata, Mehoni and Hewane.

2. The Ethiopian Roads Authority invites eligible bids for the Design and Construction Road Project mentioned in (1):-
   a) In the case of Ethiopia bidders only, its Certificate of registration from Ministry of Works and Urban Development with category GC-1 or RC-1
   b) In the case of bidders other then Ethiopian, any relevant professional practice certificate.
   c) Other appropriate documentary evidence demonstrating the bidders/ compliance, which shall include:-
      i) Its valid trading license and supplier registration certificate renewed for 1999 EFY; and
      ii) Its tax clearance certificate and VAT registration

3. The work under this contract consist of Design and Construction of the existing gravel surfaced road to Upgrading to asphalt concrete road standard and construction and repair of minor and major drainage structures.

4. Bidding will be conducted through the international competitive bidding procedures specified in the bidding documents, and are opened to all bidders, which fulfill, the above requirements.

5. Interested eligible bidders may obtain further information, inspect and acquire the bidding document at the address given below from 8:30 to 12:30 PM and 1:30 to 5:30 PM from Monday to Thursday and 8:30 to 11:30 AM and 1:30 PM to 5:30 PM from Monday to Thursday and 8:30 to 11:30 AM and 1:30 PM to 5:30 PM on Friday local time.

Ethiopian Roads Authority
Engineering Services Procurement, Design and
Technical Support Division

[54] Original document.

ERA Building, 2nd Floor, Room No. 204
Ras Abebe Aregay Street
Tel.
Fax 251-11-551 00 82 Or 551 48 66
Addis Ababa
Ethiopia

A complete set of bidding documents prepared in English language may be purchased by interested bidders on the submission of a written application to the address below and upon payment of non-refundable fee of ETB 450 or in USD 50 for the project effective as of May 30, 2007. The method of payment shall be in cash or direct deposit to ERA's account number NBE 0160101011500. address: Ethiopian Roads Authority, Engineering Service Procurement Branch Office, 2nd Floor, Room No, 204, Fax: 251-11-550 , Tel: .

6. The bidding procedure to be followed in the three-envelope procedure. The post qualification Application, Financial offers (Bids) and the Bid Security should be sealed in three separate envelopes and be clearly marked "Application for post Qualification", "Bids" and "Bid Security" for Design and Construction of Alamata-Mehoni-Hewane Road Upgrading project respectively, and the three envelopes shall in turn be enclosed by an outer envelope marked "Post qualification, Bid and Bid security for Alamata-Mehoni-Hewane Design and Construction Road Upgrading Project".
   The Post-qualification applicants will be opened and evaluated first and the bids (Financial offer) and the bid security of the bidders who pass the post qualification evaluation will be opened for further evaluation. The bids of those bidders who failed the minimum Post-qualification evaluation shall be returned unopened after the award for contract.

7. Bids must be delivered to the address below on or before July 24, 2007 at 2:30 PM. All bids must be accompanied by a bid security in the form of amount specification in the bidding documents. Late Bids will be rejected. Post qualification applications will be opened immediately thereafter in the presence of bidders/retrospectives who choose to attend at the address below on the final date and time of the bid submission as stated above.

The Director General, Ethiopian Roads Authority
Ras Abebe Aregay Street
Tel:
Fax: 251-11 551 48 66
P.O. Box 1770
Addis Ababa
Ethiopia

8. The Ethiopian Roads Authority reserves the right to accept or reject any or all Tenders without giving any reason.

Source: www.ethiomarket.com, 20 July 2014, original from ‘The Ethiopian Herald’ (2007).

APPENDIX 2.

Table 1.1 Administrative and Technical Classifications of Roads in Ethiopia

Administrative classification	**Technical classification**			
	Design Standard (DS)	Traffic (ADT)	Width (m)	Surface Type
FD (Federal Roads)	DS-1	10,000-15,000	2 by 7.3	Asphalt
	DS-2	5,000-10,000	7.3	
	DS-3	1,000-5,000	7.0	
	DS-4	200-1,000	6.7	
	DS-5	100-200	7.0	Gravel
RRAs (Regional Roads)	DS-6	50-100	6.0	
	DS-7	30-75	4.0	
	DS-8	25-50	4.0	
Woreda Road Office (Community Roads)	DS-9	0-25	4.0	Earth
	DS-10	0-15	3.3	

Source: Rony Emmenegger. 2012. 'The Roads of Decentralisation. The History of Rural Road Construction in Ethiopia.' *NCCR North-South Dialogue*, No. 39, Department of Geography, University of Zurich.

Table 1.2 Functional and Technical Classifications of Roads in Ethiopia

Functional classification					**Technical classification**			
					Design Standard (DS)	Traffic (ADT)	Width (m)	Surface Type
				Trunk	DS-1	10,000-15,000	2 by 7.3	Asphalt
			Link		DS-2	5,000-10,000	7.3	
		Main Access			DS-3	1,000-5,000	7.0	
	Collector				DS-4	200-1,000	6.7	
					DS-5	100-200	7.0	Gravel
Feeder					DS-6	50-100	6.0	
					DS-7	30-75	4.0	
					DS-8	25-50	4.0	
					DS-9	0-25	4.0	Earth
					DS-10	0-15	3.3	

Source: Rony Emmenegger. 2012. 'The Roads of Decentralisation. The History of Rural Road Construction in Ethiopia.' *NCCR North-South Dialogue*, No. 39, Department of Geography, University of Zurich.

Figures

FIGURE 2. The asphalt plant compound from a bird's eye of view, 23 January 2012. (photo by the author)

FIGURE 3. The residential compound of the asphalt plant, 5 September 2012. (photo by the author)

FIGURE 4. Arial View of the asphalt plant, 28 January 2012. (source: Google Earth)

FIGURE 5. Arial View of Chinese Camp 48 (right) and a local settlement (left), 28 January 2012. (source: Google Earth)

FIGURE 6. Girl with Chinese dump truck. The Amharic words on the truck mean ‘Love Wins’, 2 December 2011. (photo by the author)

FIGURE 7. The arrival of asphalt in Mehoni town, 11 February 2012. (photo by the author)

Bibliography

Abbink, Jon. 2009. 'The Ethiopian Second Republic and the Fragile "Social Contract".' *Africa Spectrum*, 44: 2-28.

Abu-Lughod, Lila. 1990. 'The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power through Bedouin Women.' *American Ethnologist*, 17(1): 41-55.

-------- 1986. *Veiled Sentiments. Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society*. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Alatas, Syed Hussein. 1977. *The Myth of the Lazy Native. A Study of the Image of Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th Century and its Function in the Ideology of Colonial Capitalism.* Abingdon: Routledge.

Alemayehu, Geda; Atenafu G. Meskel. 2010. *Impact of China-Africa Investment Relations. Case Study of Ethiopia*. Addis Ababa University, Department of Economics.

Anagnost, Ann. 2004. 'The Corporeal Politics of Quality (Suzhi).' *Public Culture*, 16(2): 189-208.

-------- 1997. *National Past-Times: Narrative, Representation, and Power in Modern China.* Durham: Duke University Press.

Arce, Alberto; Norman Long. 2000. 'Reconfiguring Modernity and Development from an Anthropological Perspective.' Alberto Arce; Norman Long (eds.): *Anthropology, Development and Modernities*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 1-31.

Aregawi, Berhe. 2004. 'The Origins of the Tigray People's Liberation Front.' *African Affairs*, 413 (103): 569-592.

Atkins, Keletso E. 1988. '"Kafir Time": Preindustrial Temporal Concepts and Labour Discipline in Nineteenth Century Colonial Natal.' *The Journal of African History*, 29(2): 229-244.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1984 [1986]. *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by Hélène Iswolsky. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Barth, Fredrik. (ed.) 1998 [1969]. *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries. The Social Organization of Culture Difference.* Illinois: Long Grove.

Bauman, Zygmunt. 2001. *The Individualized Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

BBC News. 2014. 'China's Oil Fears over South Sudan Fighting.' By Yuwen Wu. 8 January 2014.

-------- 2012. 'China: Africa's Plunderer or Growth Partner?' 21 May 2012.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bräutigam, Deborah. 2010. *The Dragon's Gift: The Real Story of China in Africa*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

-------- 2006. '"Flying Geese" or "Hidden Dragon"? Chinese Business and African Industrial Development.' Conference paper of the Conference on China-Africa Relations, Washington DC.

-------- 2003. 'Close Encounters: Chinese Business Networks as Industrial Catalysts in Sub-Saharan Africa.' *African Affairs*, 102: 447-467.

Bräutigam, Deborah; Tang Xiaoyang. 2009. 'China's Engagement in African Agriculture: "Down to the Countryside."' *The China Quarterly*, 1999: 686-706.

Brewer, John D. 2000. *Ethnography*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Burawoy, Michael. 2009. *The Extended Case Method. Four Countries, Four Decades, Four Great Transformations and One Theoretical Tradition.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

-------- 1972. 'Another Look at the Mineworker.' *African Social Research*, 14: 239-287.

Campbell, Jeremy M. 2012. 'Between the Material and the Figural Road: The Incompleteness of Colonial Geographies in Amazonia.' *Mobilities*, 7(4): 481-500.

Chang, Leslie T. 2009. *Factory Girls. From Village to City in a Changing China.* New York: Spiegel & Grau.

Central Statistical Agency of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (CSA). 2012. *Statistical Report on the 2012 Urban Employment Unemployment Survey*. Addis Ababa, September 2012.

-------- 2012. *2007 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia*. Addis Ababa, April, 2012.

Certeau, Michel de. 1988 [1984]. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Translated by Steven Rendall. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Chan, Anita; Richard Madsen; Jonathan Unger. 1992[1984]. *Chen Village Under Mao and Deng*. Expanded and updated edition. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Chen, Jean Jinghan. 1998. 'The Characteristics and Current Status of China's Construction Industry.' *Construction Management and Economics*, 16(6): 711-719.

Chen, Minglu; David S. G. Goodman. 2012. 'The China Model: One Country, Six Authors.' *Journal of Contemporary China*, 21(73): 169-185.

Chu, Julie Y. 2010. *Cosmologies of Credit. Transnational Mobility and the Politics of Destination in China.* Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Comaroff, Jean. 1985. *Body of Power. Spirit of Resistance. The Culture and History of a South African People.* Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.

Comaroff, Jean; John Comaroff. 1986. 'Christianity and Colonialism in South Africa.' *American Ethnologist*, 13(1): 1-22.

Constable, Nicole. 1997. *Maid to Order in Hong Kong. Stories of Filipina Workers*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

Cooley, John K. 1965. *East Wind Over Africa. Red China's African Offensive*. New York: Walker and Company.

Cooper, Frederick. 1997 *From Slaves to Squatters. Plantation Labor and Agriculture in Zanzibar and Coastal Kenya, 1890-1925.* Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann.

-------- 1992. 'Colonizing Time: Work Rhythms and Labor Conflict in Colonial Mombasa.'

Crewe, Emma; Elizabeth Harrison. 1998. *Whose Development? An Ethnography of Aid*. London and New York: Zed Books.

Dalakoglou, Dimitris. 2010. 'The Road: An Ethnography of the Albanian-Greek Cross-border Motorway.' *American Ethnologist*, 37(1): 132-149.

Davis, Deborah 2000. 'Introduction: A Revolution in Consumption.' Deborah Davis (ed.): *The Consumer Revolution in Urban China.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Dobler, Gregor 2009. 'Chinese Shops and the Formation of a Chinese Expatriate Community in Namibia.' *The China Quarterly*, 199: 707-727.

-------- 2008. 'From Scotch Whisky to Chinese Sneakers: International Commodity Flows and New Trade Networks in Oshikango, Namibia. *Africa*, 78(3): 410-432.

Donham, Donald L. 1999. *Marxist Modern. An Ethnographic History of the Ethiopian Revolution*. Berkeley and Oxford: University of California Press/James Currey Oxford.

Douglas, Mary. 2004 [1966]. *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo.* London: Routledge.

Elias, Norbert; John L. Scotson. 1994 [1965]. *The Established and the Outsiders*. London: Sage Publications.

Ellingson, Ter. 2001. *The Myth of the Noble Savage*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Erlich, Harrald. 1981. 'Tigrean Nationalism, British Involvement and Haila-Sellasse's Emerging Absolutism – Northern Ethiopia, 1941-1943.' *Asian and African Studies*, 15: 191-227.

Ethiopian Federal Ministry of Education. 2012. *Education Statistics. Annual Abstract. 2004 E.C. (2011-12 G.C.).* Addis Ababa, September 2012.

Fabian, Johannes. 2000. *Out of Our Minds. Reason and Madness in the Exploration of Central Africa*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

-------- 1986. *Language and Colonial Power. The Appropriation of Swahili in the Former Belgian Congo 1880-1938.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

-------- 1983. *Time and the Other. How Anthropology Makes Its Object.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Fan, C. Cindy. 2002. 'The Elite, the Natives, and the Outsiders: Migration and Labor Market Segmentation in Urban China.' *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 92(1): 103-124.

Farquhar, Mary; Chris Berry. 2004. 'Speaking Bitterness: History, Media and Nation in Twentieth Century China.' *Geography East & West*, 2(1): 116-143.

Ferguson, James. 1994. *The Anti-Politics Machine. "Development," Depoliticization and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

-------- 2006. *Global Shadows. Africa in the Neoliberal World Order*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Flower, John M. 2004. 'A Road Is Made: Roads, Temples, and Historical Memory in Ya'an County Sichuan.' *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 63 (3): 649-685.

Foucault, Michel. 1991 [1977]. *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. London: Penguin Books.

Francis, Marc. 2011. *When China Met Africa*. Documentary Film. Initial release: 7 October 2011.

Frank, Andre Gunder (1966): *The Development of Underdevelopment*. New York: Monthly Review Press.

Fu, Diana. 2009. 'A Cage of Voices. Producing and Doing Dagongmei in Contemporary China.' *Modern China,* 35(5): 527-561.

Fukuyama, Francis; Weiwei Zhang. 2011. 'The China Model. A Dialogue between Francis Fukuyama and Weiwei Zhang.' *New Perspectives Quarterly*, Fall issue: 40-67.

Gal, Susan. 1993. 'Diversity and Contestation in Linguistic Ideologies. German Speakers in Hungary.' *Language in Society,* 22(3): 337-359.

Gebre-Egziabher, Tegegne. 2007. 'Impacts of Chinese Imports and Coping Strategies of Local Producers: the Case of Small-scale Footwear Enterprises in Ethiopia.' *The Journal of Modern African Studies,* 45(4): 647-679.

Gebru, Tareke. 1984. 'Peasant Resistance in Ethiopia. The Case of Weyane.' *The Journal of African History*, 25(1): 77-92.

Getachew, Mequanent. 1998. 'Community Development and the Role of Community Organizations: A Study in Northern Ethiopia.' *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 32(3): 494-520.

Giddens, Anthony. 1991. *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Gonzalez-Vicente, Ruben. 2011. 'The Internationalization of the Chinese State.' *Political Geography*, 30(7): 402-411.

Halper, Stefan. 2012. *The Beijing Consensus: Legitimizing Authoritarianism in Our Time.* New York: Basic Books.

Hammond, Jenny. 2002. 'Garrison Towns & the Control of Space in Revolutionary Tigray.' In James et al (eds.): *Remapping Ethiopia. Socialism & After*. Oxford: James Currey.

Harvey, Penelope. 2012. 'Cementing Relations. The Materiality of Roads and Public Spaces in Provincial Peru.' In Judith Kapferer (ed.): *Images of Power and The Power of Images.* New York & Oxford: Berghahn Books.

Harvey, Penelope; Hannah Knox 2012. 'The Enchantments of Infrastructure.' *Mobilities*, 7(4): 521-536.

Haugen, Heidi Østbø; Jørgen Carling. 2005. 'On the edge of the Chinese Diaspora: The Surge of Baihuo Business in an African City.' *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 28 (4): 639-662.

He, Feilong. 2011. '"Yizu" Jiuye Xianzhuang de Sikao [A reflection on the Current Situation of the 'Ant Tribe' Looking for Employment].' *Jingji Yu Shehui Fazhan*, 9(2): 103-106.

He, Wenping. 2007. 'The Balancing Act of China's Africa Policy.' *China Security*, 3(3): 23-40.

Herman, R. D. K. 1999. 'Coin of the Realm: The political economy of 'indolence'; in the Hawaiian Islands.' *History and Anthropology*, 11(2-3): 387-416.

Hochschild, A. R. 1979. 'Emotion Work, Feeling Rules and Social Structure.' *American Journal of Sociology* 85: 551-575.

Hobart, Mark. 1993. 'Introduction: The Growth of Ignorance?' Mark Hobart (ed.): *An Anthropological Critique of Development*. London and New York: Routledge, p. 1-30.

Hsu, Elisabeth. 2007. 'Zanzibar and its Chinese Communities.' *Population, Space and Place*, 13: 113-124.

Hu, Xinying. 2011. *China's New Underclass: Paid Domestic Labour*. London: Routledge.

Huang, Philip C. C. 2012. 'Profit-Making State Firms and China's Development Experience: 'State Capitalism' or 'Socialist Market Economy.' *Modern China*, 38: 591-629.

Humphrey, Caroline. 1994. 'Remembering an "Enemy". The Bogd Khaan in Twentieth-Century Mongolia.' Rubie S. Watson (ed.): *Memory, History, and Opposition under State Socialism*. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 21-44.

International Bank for Reconstruction and Development. 1954. *First Loan Administration Report on the Three Loans to The Empire of Ethiopia*, July 14.

-------- 1957. *Appraisal of the Second Highway Project Ethiopia*, June 12.

-------- 1967. *Appraisal for a Fourth Highway Project Ethiopia*, November 24.

-------- 1972. *Appraisal of a Fifth Highway Project Ethiopia*, June 14.

Jiefangjun Bao. 1976. '*Zantan Tielu Shengli Jungong Zhengshi Tongche*.' July 16.

Nanfang Zhoumo: '*Ren Zai Feizhou*.' Deng Jing, July 25.

Kim, Jaesok. 2013. *Chinese Labor in a Korean Factory. Class, Ethnicity, and Productivity on the Shop Floor in Globalizing China.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Kipnis, Andrew. 2006. 'Suzhi. A Keyword Approach.' *The China Quarterly*. 186: 295-313.

Kung, James Kai-sing; Xu Chenggang; Zhou Feizhou. 2013. 'From Industrialization to Urbanization: The Social Consequences of Changing Fiscal Incentives on Local Governments' Behavior.' In David Kennedy and Joseph E. Stiglitz (eds.): *Law and Economics with Chinese Characteristics: Institutions for Promoting Development in the Twenty-First Century.* Oxford University Press.

Kuper, Adam. 2000. *Culture. The Anthropologists' Account*. Harvard University Press.

Laribee, Rachel. 2008. 'The China Shop Phenomenon: Trade Supply within the Chinese Diaspora in South Africa. *Afrika Spectrum*, 43(3): 353-370.

Larkin, Brian. 2008. *Signal and Noise. Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria.* Duke University Press.

Lee, Ching Kwan. 2009. 'Raw Encounters: Chinese Managers, African Workers and the Politics of Casualization in Africa's Chinese Enclaves.' *The China Quarterly*, 199 Sept: 647-666.

-------- 2007. *Against the Law. Labor Protests in China's Rustbelt and Sunbelt.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

-------- 2002. 'From the specter of Mao to the spirit of the law: Labor insurgency in China.' *Theory and Society*, 31: 189-228.

-------- 1998. *Gender and the South China Miracle. Two Worlds of Factory Women*. University of California Press.

-------- 1995. 'Engendering the Worlds of Labor: Women Workers, Labor Markets, and Production Politics in the South China Economic Miracle.' *American Sociological Review*, 60(3): 378-397.

Li, Anshan. 2007. 'China and Africa: Policy and Challenges.' *China Security*, 3(3): 69-93.

Lin, Justin Yifu; Liu Mingxing; Tao Ran. 2013. 'Deregulation, Decentralization, and China's Growth in Transition.' In David Kennedy and Joseph E. Stiglitz (eds.): *Law and Economics with Chinese Characteristics: Institutions for Promoting Development in the Twenty-First Century*. Oxford University Press.

Lora-Wainwright, Anna. 2013. *Fighting for Breath. Living Morally and Dying of Cancer in a Chinese Village*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Lu, Fenghua. 2011. 'Gaoxiao Xiaoyuan Zhaopinhui de Youdian, Wenti Yu Duice [Advantages, Problems and Policies of Campus Recruitment at Higher Educational Institutions].' *Putian Xueyuan Xuebao*, 18(4): 40-43.

Mawdsley, Emma. 2008. 'Fu Manchu versus Dr Livingstone in the Dark Continent? Representing China, Africa and the West in British Broadsheet Newspapers.' *Political Geography*, 27(5): 509-529.

Masresha, Gugsa. 1970. 'Road Motor Transportation in Ethiopia.' B.A. Thesis, Haile Selassie I University, Department of Economics. Addis Ababa.

Mbembe, Achille. 1992. 'The Banality of Power and the Aesthetics of Vulgarity in the Postcolony.' *Public Culture* 4(2): 1-30.

Meles, Zenawi. 2011. 'States and Markets: Neoliberal Limitations and the Case for a Developmental State.' In: Akbar Noman; Kwesi Botchwey; Howard Stein; Joseph E. Stiglitz

(eds.): *Good Growth and Governance in Africa: Rethinking Development Strategies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 140-174.

Melly, Caroline. 2013. 'Ethnography of the Road: Infrastructural Vision and the Unruly Present in Contemporary Dakar.' *Africa*, 83(3): 385-402.

Mills, Mary Beth. 2005. 'From Nimble Fingers to Raised Fists: Women and Labor Activism in Globalizing Thailand.' *Signs*, 31(1): 117-144.

Ministry of Finance and Economic Development (MoFED) Ethiopia (2010): *Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP) 2010/11-2014/15*. Addis Ababa, September 2010.

Mitchell, Timothy. 2002. *Rule of Experts. Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity.* Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

-------- 1988. *Colonising Egypt*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Morck, Randall; Bernard Yeung; Minyuan Zhao. 2008. 'Perspectives on China's Outward Foreign Direct Investment.' *Journal of International Business Studies*, 39: 337-350.

Moyo, Dambisa. 2010. *Dead Aid. Why Aid is Not Working and How There is Another Way for Africa*. London: Penguin Books.

Mrázek, Rudolf. 2002. *Engineers of Happy Land. Technology and Nationalism in a Colony*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Murphy, Rachel. 2004. 'Turning Peasants into Modern Chinese Citizens. "Population Quality" Discourse, Demographic Transition and Primary Education. *The China Quarterly*, 177 (Mar.): 1-20.

Nader, Laura. 1972. 'Up the Anthropologist – Perspectives Gained from Studying Up.' Dell. H. Hymes (ed.): *Reinventing Anthropology*. New York: Vintage Books, pp. 284-311.

Nanfang Zhoumo. 2007. '*Ren Zai Feizhou*.' Deng Jing, July 25.

Nash, June. 1993. *We Eat the Mines and the Mines Eat Us. Dependency and Exploitation in Bolivian Tin Mines*. New York: Columbia University Press.

-------- 1972. ‘The Devil in Bolivia’s Nationalized Tin Mines.’ *Science & Society*, 36(2): 221-233.

Nielsen, Morten. 2012. ‘Roadside Inventions: Making Time and Money at a Road Construction Site in Mozambique.’ *Mobilities*, 7(4): 467-480.

Nyíri, Pál. 2006. ‘The Yellow Man’s Burden: Chinese Migrants on a Civilizing Mission.’ *The China Journal*, 56: 83-106.

-------- 2001. ‘Expatriating is Patriotic? The Discourse on “New Migrants” in the People’s Republic of China and Identity Construction among Recent Migrants from the PRC’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 27(4):635-653.

-------- 1999. *New Chinese Migrants in Europe. The Case of the Chinese Community in Hungary*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Oi, Jean C. 1999. *Rural China Takes Off: Institutional Foundations of Economic Reform*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

-------- 1995. ‘The Role of the Local State in China’s Transitional Economy.’ *The China Quarterly*, 144: 1132-1149.

Ong, Aihwa. 1987. *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline. Factory Women in Malaysia.* State University of New York Press.

Ong, Aihwa; Li Zhang. 2008. ‘Introduction: Privatizing China. Powers of the Self, Socialism from Afar.’ Li Zhang and Aihwa Ong (eds.): *Privatizing China: Socialism from Afar*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, pp. 1-19.

Ortner, Sherry B. 2010. ‘Access: Reflections on Studying up in Hollywood.’ *Ethnography* 11 (2): 211-233.

-------- 1995. ‘Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal.’ *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34(1): 173-193.

Parry, Jonathan P. 1999. 'Lords of Labour: Working and Shirking in Bhilai.' *Contributions to Indian Sociology,* 33(1-2): 107-140.

Perry, Elizabeth J. 2002. 'Moving the Masses: Emotion Work in the Chinese Revolution.' *Mobilization: An International Journal*, 7(2): 111-128.

Pina-Cabral, Joao de. 1987. 'Paved Roads and Enchanted Mooresses: The Perception of the Past Among the Peasant of the Alto Minho.' *Man,* 22(4): 715-175.

Piot, Charles. 1999. *Remotely Global. Village Modernity in West Africa*. Chicago. University of Chicago.

Pun, Ngai. 2005. *Made in China. Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace.* Durham and London: Duke University Press.

-------- 1999. 'Becoming Dagongmei (Working Girls). The Politics of Identity and Difference in Reform China.' *The China Journal*, 42: 1-18.

Pun, Ngai; Lu Huilin. 2010a. 'Unfinished Proletarianization: Self, Anger, and Class Action among the Second Generation of Peasant-Workers in Present-Day China. *Modern China*, 36(5): 493-519.

-------- 2010b. 'A Culture of Violence: The Labor Subcontracting System and Collective Action by Construction Workers in Post-Socialist China.' *The China Journal*, 64 (July): 143-158.

Radcliffe-Brown, Alfred R. 1940. 'On Joking Relationships.' *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 13(3): 195-210.

Ramo, Joshua C. 2004. '*The Beijing Consensus*.' London: The Foreign Policy Centre.

Renmin Ribao. 1996. '*Tafang Aisaiebiya "Zhongguolu"*.' Chen Man, December 1.

Reuters. 2009. 'Resource-Hungry China Invests in Africa.' 29 September 2009.

Rofel, Lisa. 1999. *Other Modernities. Gendered Yearnings in China after Socialism.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Scott, James C. 1998. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. Yale University Press.

-------- 1990. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance. Hidden Transcripts.* Yale University Press.

-------- 1985. *Weapons of the Weak. Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Smith, Thomas C. 1986. 'Peasant Time and Factory Time in Japan.' *Past & Present*, 111: 165-197.

Snow, Philip. 1988. *The Star Raft. China's Encounter with Africa*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.

Solinger, Dorothy J. 1999. *Contesting Citizenship in Urban China. Peasant Migrants, the State, and the Logic of the Market.* University of California Press.

Stoler, Ann Laura. 2009 *Along the Archival Grain. Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense.* Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

------- 1997. 'Sexual Affronts and Racial Frontiers. European Identities and the Cultural Politics of Exclusion in Colonial Southeast Asia.' Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (eds.): *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 198-227.

-------- 1989. 'Rethinking Colonial Categories: European Communities and the Boundaries of Rule.' *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 31(1): 134-161.

-------- 1995[1985]. *Capitalism and Confrontation in Sumatra's Plantation Belt, 1870-1979.* Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.

Sun, Wanning. 2009. 'Suzhi on the Move: Body, Place, and Power. *Positions*, 17(3): 617-642.

Tam, C. M.; S.X. Zeng; Z.M. Deng. 2004. 'Identifying Elements of Poor Construction Safety Management in China.' *Safety Science*, 42: 569-586.

Tang, Xiaoyang. 2010. 'Bulldozer or Locomotive? The Impact of Chinese Enterprises on the Local Employment in Angola and the DRC.' *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 45: 350-368.

Tapias, Maria. 2006. 'Emotions and the Intergenerational Embodiment of Social Suffering in Rural Bolivia.' *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, 20(3): 399-415.

Taussig, Michael. 2010[1980]. *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America.* The University of North Carolina Press.

Taylor, Ian. 2009. *China and Africa. Engagement and Compromise*. London: Routledge.

Teets, Jessica C. 2014. *Civil Society under Authoritarianism: The China Model.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

-------- 2013. 'Let Many Civil Societies Bloom: The Rise of Consultative Authoritarianism in China.' *The China Quarterly*, 213 (March): 19-38.

The Economist. 2004. 'China's Material Needs: The Hungry Dragon.' 19 February 2004.

The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. 2004. 'Labour Proclamation No. 377/2003.' *Federal Negarit Gazeta*, 10th Year, 12: 2453-2504.

-------- 1992. 'Labour Proclamation No. 42/1993.' *Negarit Gazeta*, 52 (27): 268-328.

Thompson, E. P. 1967. 'Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism.' *Past & Present*, 38 (Dec.): 56-97.

Thunø, Mette. 2001. 'Reaching Out and Incorporating Chinese Overseas: The Trans-territorial Scope of the PRC by the End of the 20th Century.' *The China Quarterly* 168: 910-929.

Tsega, Ab Kassa. 2000. 'A History of Allamata Town (1936-1998).' A senior essay submitted to the department of history. Addis Ababa University.

Turner, Christena L. 1995. *Japanese Workers in Protest. An Ethnography of Consciousness and Experience*. Berkeley and Low Angeles: University of California Press.

Unger, Jonathan; Anita Chan. 1999. 'Inheritors of the Boom: Private Enterprise and the Role of Local Government in a Rural South China Township.' Working Paper No. 89, January 1999. Perth: Murdoch University.

United Nations Development Programme. 1969. *Ethiopia. General Road Study. Draft Final Report.* Vol 4/5 Recommended Highway Programme and Implementation.

Vandercasteelen, Joachim. 2011. *Farm/non-farm linkages in smallholder agriculture: Evidence from Tigray, Northern Ethiopia*. Master thesis in bio-engineering (unpublished). Leuven: Universiteit van Leuven.

Wallerstein, Immanuel (2011 [1974]): *The Modern World-System I. Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century.* Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Wedeen, Lisa. 1999. *Ambiguities of Domination. Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Wolf, Eric. 1982. *Europe and the People Without History.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

World Bank. 2012. 'Chinese FDI in Ethiopia. A World Bank Survey.' Working Paper 74384, 1 November 2012.

Wu, Bin; Liu Hong. 2012. 'Bringing Class Back In: Class consciousness and solidarity among Chinese migrant workers in Italy and the UK.' *Ethnic and Racial Studies*.

Wu, Fulong. 2002. 'China's Changing Urban Governance in the Transition Towards a More Market-oriented Economy.' *Urban Studies*, 39(7): 1071-1093.

Xia, Gaofa. 2011. 'Gao Fangjia dui Daxue Biyesheng Zeye de Yingxiang [The Effects of High House Prices on University Graduates Looking for Employment].' *Zhongguo Qingnian Yanjiu*, 6: 56-59.

Xiang, Biao. 2014. 'The Would-be Migrants: the Case of China.' *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia*. forthcoming.

--------2012. 'Labor Transplant: 'Point-to-Point' Transnational Labor Migration in East Asia.' *The South Atlantic Quarterly*. 111(4): 721-739.

-------- 2003. 'Emigration from China. A Sending Country Perspective.' *International Migration*, 41(3): 21-48.

Yan, Hairong. 2008. *New Masters, New Servants. Migration, Development, and Women Workers in China.* Durham and London: Duke University Press.

-------- 2003. 'Neoliberal Governmentality and Neohumanism: Organizing Suzhi/Value Flow through Labor Recruitment Networks.' *Cultural Anthropology* 18 (4): 493-523.

Yan, Hairong; Barry Sautman. 2010. 'Chinese Farms in Zambia. From Socialist to "Agro Imperialist" Engagement?"' *African and Asian Studies* 9: 307-333.

Yan, Yunxiang. 2009. *The Individualization of Chinese Society.* London School of Economics Monographs on Social Anthropology. Volume 77. Oxford: Berg.

Yeh, Emily. 2013. *Taming Tibet. Landscape Transformation and the Gift of Chinese Development.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Young, John. 1997. *Peasant Revolution in Ethiopia. The Tigray People's Liberation Front, 1975-1991*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

-------- 1998. 'Regionalism and Democracy in Ethiopia.' *Third World Quarterly*, 19(2): 191-204.

Yu, George T. 1968. 'Dragon in the Bush: Peking's Presence in Africa.' *Asian Survey*, 8(12): 1018-1026.

Zhang, Li. 2010. *In Search of Paradise. Middle-Class Living in a Chinese Metropolis*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

-------- 2001. *Strangers in the City. Reconfigurations of Space, Power and Social Networks within China's Floating Population*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Zhao, Suisheng. 2010. 'The China Model: Can It Replace the Western Model of Modernization?' *Journal of Contemporary China*, 19 (65): 419-436.

Zhonghua Renmin Gonghe Guo. 2013. *Laodongfa* [Labour Law]. Second edition. Beijing: Zhongguo Fazhi Chubanshe.

Zhou, Kate Xiao. 1996. *How the Farmers Changed China. Power of the People.* Boulder and Oxford: Westview Press.

Zhu, Hongliang; Hu Xiangzhen and Wang Ying. 2001. 'China's Construction Regulatory Systems.' *Building Research & Information*, 29(4): 265-269.

Zhu, Jieming. 2004). 'Local Developmental State and Order in China's Urban Development during Transition.' *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 28(2): 424-447.