

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Making Friends, Building Roads: Chinese Entrepreneurship and the Search for Reliability in Angola

Cheryl Mei-ting Schmitz

ABSTRACT Based on fieldwork conducted in 2013–2014 with a provincial-level Chinese state-owned construction firm in Luanda, this article examines how Chinese businesses attempted to expand in the aftermath of a booming period of Angolan postwar reconstruction. Chinese entrepreneurs found that business could only be done with the help of local mediators promising to open otherwise inaccessible portals to political expediency. They shared with their would-be collaborators an image of Angola as a land of vast extractive opportunities, available only to those who could gain access through crucial personal connections. Highly aware of the opacity and potential deceptiveness of their “friends,” in part because they engaged in dissimulative practices themselves, Chinese businesspeople evaluated Angolan partners less in terms of sincerity than efficacy. Amid a general atmosphere of mistrust, “reliability” emerged as a necessary quality for constructing relationships of mutual benefit and exploitation. [*friendship, mistrust, business, globalization, China–Angola relations*]

RESUMEN Basado en trabajo de campo conducido en 2013–2014 con una firma de construcción de propiedad del estado chino a nivel provincial en Luanda, este artículo examina cómo las firmas chinas intentaron expandirse tras un período de auge de la reconstrucción de la postguerra angoleña. Los empresarios chinos encontraron que los negocios podían darse sólo con la ayuda de mediadores locales prometiendo abrir portales de otra manera inaccesibles a la conveniencia política. Ellos compartieron con sus aspirantes a colaboradores una imagen de Angola como una tierra de oportunidades extractivas vastas, disponible solamente a aquellos que podrían ganar acceso a través de conexiones personales cruciales. Altamente conscientes de la opacidad y deshonestidad potencial de sus “amigos,” en parte porque ellos se involucraron en prácticas disimuladoras por sí mismos, los empresarios chinos evaluaron los compañeros angoleños menos en términos de sinceridad que de eficacia. En medio de una atmósfera general de desconfianza, la “fiabilidad” emergió como una cualidad necesaria para construir relaciones de beneficio mutuo y explotación. [*amistad, desconfianza, empresa, globalización, relaciones China–Angola*]

RESUMO Com base em trabalho de campo realizado em Luanda em 2013–2014 com uma construtora estatal chinesa administrada a nível provincial, este artigo investiga as tentativas de expansão de empresas chinesas na esteira do próspero período de reconstrução pós-guerra em Angola. Nesse contexto, os empresários chineses descobriram que só poderiam realizar negócios com a ajuda de mediadores locais, os quais lhes prometiam abrir portas para conexões políticas de outro modo inacessíveis. Os empresários e seus possíveis colaboradores compartilhavam a imagem de Angola como uma terra de grandes

oportunidades de ganhos disponíveis apenas para quem pudesse acessá-las por meio de relações pessoais cruciais. Bastante conscientes da opacidade de seus “amigos” e da possibilidade de serem por eles enganados, em parte por se envolverem em práticas semelhantes, os empresários chineses avaliavam seus parceiros angolanos mais em termos de eficácia do que de sinceridade. Em meio a uma atmosfera de desconfiança generalizada, “confiabilidade” tornou-se uma qualidade necessária à construção de relações recíprocas de vantagem e exploração. [amizade, desconfiança, empreendimento, globalização, relações China–Angola]

摘要 基于2013年至2014年在安哥拉首都罗安达的一家中国省级国有建筑公司进行的田野调查，本文探讨在安哥拉战后重建带来发展浪潮之后，中国企业如何尝试拓展业务。在这一扩展过程中，中国企业家发现，只有在那些承诺可以以权宜之计接触到政治权力的当地中介人的帮助下业务才有得以开展的可能。他们和这些未来可能的合作者一起将安哥拉想象为一片广阔的采掘机会之地，只有那些能够掌握关键人脉关系的人才能开拓。中国商人充分了解他们“朋友”的暧昧态度和被这些“朋友”欺骗的可能性，部分原因是这些中国商人自己也并非诚信经营，因此他们评价安哥拉合伙人的标准是以效率而不是以真诚为主。在普遍不信任的气氛中，“靠谱”成为了构建相互获利相互利用关系的必备条件。[友谊，不信任，商业，全球化，中安关系]

In 2012, while conducting interviews with Chinese migrants in Luanda, I met a young couple from Fujian province selling shoes and clothing in a corner of São Paulo Market, a large collection of shops and street stalls in the center of the city. After several friendly conversations at their sales counter, Huimin and Xiaolong¹ invited me to the apartment they rented nearby for a lunch of Fuzhou fish balls—a specialty of their hometown that they shipped over inside containers full of merchandise. As we chatted over bowls of noodle soup, the couple told me about their tentative plans to leave Angola and relocate their business elsewhere. They imagined that somewhere in South America, perhaps Argentina, would offer greater “security” and “stability” than Angola. Their ultimate dream was to end up in the United States, but that would require learning English, among other things. “I can teach you,” I offered spontaneously, to which my new friends replied with enthusiasm, “Yes!” Xiaolong’s eyes lit up. “That’s just what I was thinking! This is why we like to make friends. You know, we have a saying in Chinese: when you make a new friend, you pave a new road” (Ch. *Duo yi ge pengyou, duo yi tiao lu*).²

Over a year later, I returned to Angola for a year of fieldwork and took up an internship at a Chinese state-owned enterprise (SOE). One afternoon, as I sat with one of the Chinese managers at a store the company operated, an energetic young Angolan man came stomping over to greet us in Chinese. The man introduced himself to me as John—he used the English version, not the Portuguese João, much more common in Angola. When I asked how he had learned Chinese, he told me he’d lived in China for a year and a half. Now, he worked as a translator for several Chinese companies in

Angola. “I have around 450 clients,” he bragged, then went on to assure me that if I ever had any problems with the police, I could call him. When John asked how long I would stay in Angola, I told him at least six months. “But six months is *very little* time to stay here in Angola,” he admonished. “If you stay in Angola for three more years, the doors—you know what I mean by ‘doors’ [Pt. *Tas a ver as portas*]? The doors will go on opening! There’s *a lot* of money in this country, you know? There’s a lot of business to be done! And all of this must have a basis in *friendship* [Pt. *amizade*]. That’s right. Because if you are my friend, maybe later, when you want to do something, I’ll have a channel [Pt. *um canal*]. You know what a ‘channel’ is, don’t you?”

In each of these interactions, my Chinese and Angolan interlocutors appealed to an idea of friendship as a facilitating relationship, an infrastructural portal that would lead to other benefits, including commercial ones. For Xiaolong, friendly relations with an American might lead to an extension of chances for gaining a livelihood, increasing his and his family’s social mobility. For John, friendship similarly provided a basis for accessing pathways otherwise closed off. References to “roads” and “channels” provided imagery for relations of obligatory reciprocity that could bind people together and result in mutual gain (Zhao 2019),³ while the image of “doors” inspired fantasies of opportunity. They were barriers to a realm of possibilities for enrichment, gates that could be unlocked if only one had the right contacts.

Modern capitalist society, at least in its Euro-American variant, has been understood to be built on a basic separation between impersonal institutions and personal human relations (Hart 2005). An ideal of depersonalized rational

calculation necessary for the functioning of capitalist enterprise (Weber [1930] 2001) persists, leading feminist anthropologists to urge attention to the significance of kinship and other kinds of sociality in the making of capitalist relations (Bear et al. 2015). The notion that emotional personal ties should be kept separate from instrumental commercial interactions echoes Aristotle's ideal of "virtuous friendship" in the *Ethics*, but it was put forth most strongly during the eighteenth-century Scottish Enlightenment by Adam Smith. Theorizing the market as a space of exchange in which "ruthless self-interest" could be pursued freely, Smith considered the separate realm of friendship, "understood as voluntary, egalitarian, personal, and based on an affective bond" (Carey 2017, 47; Silver 1990), to be morally superior to other types of sociality.

Anthropologists working in both African and Chinese contexts, however, have long noted the fusion of interest and affect in both settings. Studies of *guanxi*, a set of social practices involving "the exchange of gifts, favors, and banquets; the cultivation of personal relationships and networks of mutual dependence; and the manufacturing of obligation and indebtedness" (Yang 1994, 6), boomed in the 1990s as anthropologists sought to understand the new economic and social fabric of post-Mao China (Kipnis 1997; Smart 1993; Yan 1996). In a rather different context, southern Africa in the wake of neoliberal structural adjustment and an AIDS epidemic, anthropologists have described how relationships, often highly unequal, between friends, family, and lovers serve as vehicles for the distribution of economic resources (Ferguson 2015; Hunter 2010). Although such practices always entail some measure of moral ambiguity, the melding of emotional bonds with selfish, practical interests is often not viewed as deviating from an idealized model unachievable in practice; rather, it may be openly acknowledged and actively cultivated as an ordinary part of social life.

To some extent, references to friendship among Chinese and Angolan business collaborators (Ch. *hezuo huoban*) echo state-level rhetoric regarding China–Africa relations. As Emma Mawdsley (2012) has noted, part of what distinguishes Global South donors from their Northern predecessors is a discursive performance of egalitarianism, respect, and mutual benefit. Instead of taking an approach of assumed inequality in which the donor provides a charitable "gift" to the presumably weaker recipient, Southern development partners emphasize reciprocal relations of collaboration between allegedly egalitarian states with shared histories of colonial humiliation. Especially among former socialist regimes, the language of "friendship" bears traces of anti-imperialist fraternity, remobilized in the current moment for the pursuit of economic development. In this context, instrumental gains are made explicit through slogans of "win-win," donor countries' national self-interest is openly acknowledged, and "recipient countries are constructed as sites of promise and opportunity" (Mawdsley 2012, 152).

Similarly, in my interlocutors' renditions above, "friendship" is not the result of "natural sympathy" (Nehamas 2008)

but a manufactured relationship that places affective ties in the service of instrumental goals. Such goals were signaled by the metaphors of roads, doors, and channels—all ways and means to something beyond the friendship "in itself," that elusive Aristotelian ideal. The idea that strategic social relationships would be necessary for Chinese entrepreneurs to access lucrative business opportunities in Angola was further premised on a specific imaginary of the Angolan market as an extractive paradise, full of natural resources ripe for exploitation. Following the 2002 declaration of an end to the twenty-seven-year-long Angolan civil war, Angolan political leaders sought international support to finance a massive National Reconstruction Program. Unable or unwilling to accept conditionalities imposed by funders based in Europe or the United States, the Angolan government turned to China, and signed an agreement in 2003. This stipulated that credit lines from the would be used to finance infrastructure projects. Chinese state-owned enterprises would fulfill the majority of contracts, and Angolan oil would guarantee repayment of the loans (Corkin 2013).⁴ Over the next few years, Angola would become one of the top sources of imported oil for China and China's largest trading partner on the African continent (Alves 2013).

Chinese media had been reporting for years on Angola as a key oil producer and market full of "golden opportunities" for Chinese businesses (Liu 2012), and by 2010, there were estimated to be over fifty state-owned and four hundred private Chinese companies "involved in Angola's national reconstruction" (Macauhub 2010). In an ethnographic study of how the national economy form is performatively enacted and sustained in Equatorial Guinea, Hannah Appel (2017, 310) has shown how economic theory, specifically that of the "resource curse," combines with "private-sector fantasies" to give life to "translocal imaginings of the endless riches to be had on the Equatoguinean frontier," however distant they may be from the reality of historically produced poverty and political repression. In Angola at the time of my fieldwork, Chinese entrepreneurs shared with their Angolan collaborators a similar imaginary of resource wealth. Courtship of business partners was thus animated by both the potential for gaining access to lucrative opportunities and the possibility of being deceived or swindled out of them.

Indeed, the risk of being taken advantage of by someone like John was a constant concern for the Chinese entrepreneurs I met in Angola. Although their entry into the Angolan market had been facilitated by the state-level agreement between China and Angola, many Chinese businesspeople in Angola in 2013–2014 found themselves in positions of vulnerability vis-à-vis Angolan state regulatory actors, who frequently targeted Chinese companies and individuals for extortion. In order to keep their businesses afloat, they needed not only to expand into new sectors, beyond government contracts, but also to establish new partnerships with Angolan collaborators who might protect them. In sum, Chinese entrepreneurs attempted to collaborate with precisely the kinds of individuals who could most

readily exploit them. This, alongside their unfamiliarity with Angolan linguistic and social conventions, contributed to a disposition of mistrust among my Chinese interlocutors, a general wariness about their Angolan “friends.” Whereas it has often been assumed that mistrust is detrimental to economic relationships, however, in this case of Angolan–Chinese collaborations in the twenty-first century, opacity and mistrust allowed business to flourish.

DRILLING INTO AFRICA

I first met Manager Deng, party secretary and Trade Department director at the provincial-level SOE I call Northwest Construction, in November 2013. I had arrived in Luanda the previous month to conduct research on Chinese investment and migration in postwar Angola, and an acquaintance had brought me to Shopping ChinAngola, a commercial center located in a peripheral zone undergoing extensive redevelopment. The shopping center was the result of a partnership between a branch of the Angolan government and a private Chinese construction firm. It rented retail and wholesale spaces exclusively to Chinese vendors, who sold building materials and related products to both Angolan and Chinese customers. Having opened the previous year, ChinAngola had already been the target of some controversy in local media, in part because the apparent Chineseness of the space was interpreted as exclusionary of Angolans—it had earned a reputation as the only “Chinese” shopping mall in the city, and was often framed by non-Chinese as a symbol of the insidious Chinese invasion of Angola. Many insisted I had to see it. At the store he managed, I met Li Jun, a twenty-something-year-old deputy director of Northwest Construction’s Trade Department, who eventually introduced me to his supervisor, a middle-aged Director Deng.

Northwest Construction was unique in that it was the only SOE to operate out of Shopping ChinAngola, although I later learned that collaboration with private Chinese companies and individual entrepreneurs was not unusual for this firm. Indeed, the company’s forays into commercial sales of construction materials and household appliances represented a mode of operation characteristic of many Chinese businesses in Angola at the time of my fieldwork. Northwest Construction had first come to Angola in 2005, just two years after the Angolan Ministry of Finance and the Chinese Ministry of Commerce had finalized their “resources for infrastructure” agreement. Subcontracting for central-level SOEs and other larger Chinese companies, Northwest Construction completed several Angolan government projects related to postwar reconstruction, but by 2013, when I began a ten-month period of fieldwork, company managers had begun to look for opportunities outside the construction sector. They complained that the market had become “saturated” (Ch. *baohé*) with competition from Chinese, Portuguese, and Brazilian contractors, and they claimed that in order not to be “eliminated” (Ch. *bei taotai*) from it, the company would have to pursue a strategy of “diversified devel-

opment” (Ch. *duoyuanhua fazhan*). This included opening a shop to sell air-conditioners and ceramic tiles at Shopping ChinAngola.

The Trade Department was badly in need of a translator, since none of its Chinese employees spoke fluent Portuguese, and I volunteered my language skills in exchange for the opportunity to learn more about everyday life and work at the company. After a couple of months visiting the company’s ChinAngola store on a near-daily basis, Director Deng offered me a dormitory room at one of the company’s compounds, where I lived from January 2014 until the end of my fieldwork. One evening, over tea in the office adjacent to his dorm room, Director Deng explained to me why Northwest Construction’s subsidiary in Angola was the most promising in the company’s entire global network: “There are two main reasons why Angola is a rich country today: first, because it has oil, and second, because of the way land was distributed to generals after the war.⁵ Generals who received land with diamonds or other resources were luckier, but anyone who got land could use it to make money. So people started to get rich. Now, the money coming from China has given people another opportunity. People will come to you with a project, and when you give them a quote of, say, one million, they’ll tell you, ‘Just add 500,000,’ or ‘Why not just make it two million?’ In this way, they can make money without having to do anything, as long as they have some connection to the government.” I asked if the prevalence of “corrupt” practices like these would not impede business development, but Deng assured me, “Angola is a good place to do business, because there are so many openings to exploit” (Ch. *hen duo kongzi keyi zuan*; lit: many holes to bore through).

Director Deng had been working in Angola for nearly ten years, and his social media nickname was well suited to his business philosophy: African Drill (Ch. *feizhou zuan*). *Zuan* (钻) means to drill or bore into, both literally, in the sense of drilling a hole, and figuratively, in the sense of immersion in an activity. The character is also evocative of the Chinese word for diamond, *zuanshi* (钻石), a significant mineral export of Angola. It is unclear whether Deng noticed the irony of his use of a drilling metaphor in a context where resource extraction was a source of both tremendous wealth and stinging inequality. Regardless, his choice of social media name was revealing in at least two ways. First, it reflected the entrepreneurial ambitions of both individual managers, many of whom were engaged in side businesses, and the company itself, which sought to retain “competitiveness” (Ch. *jingzheng li*) on the Angolan market by engaging in ventures ranging from noodle restaurants to auto-repair shops. The company’s behavior and the aspirations of its managers thus blurred a perceived boundary between state-owned and private Chinese firms. Second, the image reflected Deng’s vision of Angola or Africa as a moneymaking arena, full of gaps to be pried open. The “holes” (Ch. *kongzi*) he mentioned may have referred to opportunities generally, but they did not preclude illegal activities.⁶

FIXERS AND FRAUDSTERS

Angolan law, as encountered by the Chinese businesspeople among whom I conducted research, was not a rigid set of regulations but rather a flexible system to be maneuvered or manipulated. For foreigners and Angolans alike, the degree to which one could move within bureaucratic or legal structures was in large part determined by one's personal connections. The mobilization of actual or fictive family relations, called *cunhas*, has been crucial to navigating everyday social life in contemporary Angola, especially in encounters with state agents (Schubert 2017, 112). To be able to activate a *cunha*, or "insert a wedge," one must have situated oneself within a network of hierarchical relations through which material benefits and access to administrative efficacy flowed. One might already be personally connected to someone who could speed up some administrative process or waive a fine. If not, one would have to deliberately cultivate relations of reciprocal affection and respect with individuals in positions of authority (Gaibazzi 2018). Angolan interlocutors reported to me, half-jokingly, that early on in the National Reconstruction Program, Chinese drivers could get past routine traffic police stops by simply shouting the only "Portuguese" word they knew, *Kopelipa!*—the nickname of General Manuel Hélder Vieira Dias, then head of the president's military office and one of the most powerful men in Angolan politics. By the time of my fieldwork, however, Chinese entrepreneurs, at least at Northwest Construction, appeared to lack such readily available social resources.

Besides the ubiquitous stops by traffic police, which often resulted in hostile negotiation over payment of a fine for some questionable violation, Trade Department managers at the Shopping ChinAngola store received frequent visits from various agents of state regulatory authority. On one of my first visits to the store, I myself encountered representatives from the Ministry of Commerce filling out an inspection form. They said they had found several problems with the store, including a lack of fire extinguishers, and one of them told us to call his aunt, a Dona Lúcia, from the Fire Department, who would provide "guidance." The next day, Dona Lúcia appeared with one of her colleagues, and after looking around for nearly an hour, enumerated several issues that would have to be rectified. In addition to a second "No Smoking" sign and fire-safety training for at least one employee, ten special fire extinguishers would have to be ordered, at a cost of \$140 USD each, plus \$60 USD to have each one filled. They could be purchased directly through the Fire Department—in other words, from her. In addition, the inspectors would have to be compensated for their transport, a fee of 10,000 kwanzas (roughly \$100 USD). When I told them I would have to speak with the managers before any payments could be made, the inspectors launched into a lengthy speech about how they had come to help, not to cause trouble, "and that's why we are *not* asking for money."

Although he was unaware of the details of the inspectors' demands, Li Jun appeared to be familiar with the kind of practice they were engaged in, as he approached me after

they left to ask sarcastically, "Did they come to spend money or make money?" Indeed, the strategy these regulatory figures employed, to identify a violation for which they could then offer a remedy, invariably involving monetary payment, was nicely summarized by a Portuguese acquaintance with whom I later shared this story: "They create problems in order to sell solutions" (Pt. *Criam dificuldades para vender facilidades*). Although these regulatory tactics were not exclusively imposed on Chinese businesses, Chinese entrepreneurs often suspected they were targeted more because, in comparison with other foreigners, they were perceived to be wealthy beneficiaries of Chinese state policy, unable to negotiate due to language constraints, or more willing to resolve problems by means of cash payments.

The Portuguese word *facilidades* (lit: facilities), like the roads, doors, and channels invoked above, was sometimes used by Angolan interlocutors to describe the many benefits that could result from strategic personal connections. Chinese entrepreneurs similarly found it essential to rely on personal connections in order to conduct business in Angola, and they were regularly approached by individuals who offered "facilitation," even without "creating difficulties" first. For example, on another visit to the Northwest Construction store, a man approached to tell me he was "working with" the National Roads Institute and had a large project to build 180 local government offices, ten in each province. Following a script I'd seen Li Jun perform with other potential business associates, I told him the company might be interested, and I mentioned the experience they had with some well-known projects. "I was also part of that project!" he exclaimed when I mentioned a government media center. "I know the director of the company that built it. Isn't his name Lu? Or Wu? I don't remember, but I know he's director of that company." The man's eagerness to demonstrate shared participation on an important project was betrayed by his shaky memory of the company executive's name.

When I offered the visitor some water, he asked me, "Are you Chinese?" I explained that I'd come from the United States, although one of my parents was Chinese. Again, eager to show something was shared between us, he told me his parents were also from two different countries: "My mother is Angolan, and my father is from São Tomé." I asked if he ever visited his father's country. "Yes! I go there all the time. I have a house there, on a big piece of land. São Tomé is a beautiful country, and very rich in resources. Sonangol [the Angolan state oil company] is beginning to explore around there, in the Gulf of Guinea." The allusion to wealth in resources, still untapped, suggested some hidden potential to our nascent business partnership.

The man explained that he would need some official documentation from Northwest Construction if we were indeed interested in obtaining the contract. One would be addressed to him and the other to the Ministry of Sports, which he said was planning to begin construction on youth recreational centers across the country—a departure from his original proposal. "My uncle is the minister," he said,

carefully pronouncing the name so that I would remember it. I told him I'd have to speak with the company directors to see if they were interested. "I've worked with many Chinese companies," he tried to reassure me, in a slightly arrogant tone, "And that's how I go about earning my 'ten percents.' And you will earn something too, at least some two or three percent. Whoever rolls with me makes money [Pt. *Quem anda comigo ganha dinheiro!*]" He laughed. "Later, you will go back to the United States a rich woman, to see your family, your husband and your child, with all the money you made in Africa!"

In this instance, a stranger claiming to have personal connections to lucrative government projects appeared to have entered Northwest Construction's store at random, in search of a Chinese contractor with whom he might share the spoils of a construction project. His boasting of a close family member employed as head of a government ministry was intended as a display of social capital in the Bourdieusian sense: potential or actual resources that could be mobilized as a result of his position within a semi-institutionalized network (Bourdieu 1986). The reference to a parent from São Tomé would have performed a similar function in Angola, where elite families were often rumored to have foreign origins—then-president José Eduardo dos Santos was himself suspected to have been born in São Tomé (Schubert 2017, 98). Like John, above, this man had tried to amplify his credibility by describing his record of collaboration with other Chinese companies, and he openly admitted to earning money in precisely the way Deng had described, by adding a certain amount to the budget requested. He referred to these earnings as "ten percents," chuckling as he suggested I would also earn something. His laughter was an intimation of complicity (Driessen 2019) with me, who he assumed to have come, like other expatriates, to Angola without any family members and with the primary goal of making money, even if by morally or legally questionable means.

Fixers like this potential collaborator attempted to seduce with imaginaries of Angola, or Africa, as a realm of vast opportunities for profit—imaginaries shared by their would-be Chinese partners.⁷ At the same time that Angola appeared as a place for money to be made, however, it was also understood to be governed by opaque and highly personalized structures of power, access to which would determine whether a business could thrive. The promise of wealth was kept at a distance, hidden and accessible only by means of those with the proper connections. Gatekeepers like the supposed minister's nephew promised facilitation, at a price, while others who claimed connections to government, like the inspectors who had visited the store earlier, threatened obstruction. Both played on the unfamiliarity of Chinese entrepreneurs with Angolan social and political networks. Chinese businesspeople, for their part, were wary of the possibility of imposture. As Northwest Construction's visitor drove away in a dented and dust-stained sedan, I asked Ma Hui, a Trade Department accountant, if he thought we

should tell Director Deng about the man's proposal. "We can," Ma said, "But what if this guy's a fraud [Ch. *pianzi*]?"⁸

WORKING TOGETHER WITHOUT TRUST

Ma's question raised the possibility of deception, which was echoed by Director Deng a few days later, when I reported my meeting with the visitor. "He asked for letters of introduction," I told Deng, who responded, "We can do that. No problem." He did not say anything further about how we would proceed, and silence hung in the air. Then he continued, "But some Black people can be unreliable [Ch. *bu kaopu*]." He went on to recount an experience that, for him, could lead to this racialized generalization. A few years before, he had been invited to a similar discussion, about a large and lucrative construction project, but when he and his translator arrived, they discovered that the man they met with did not have a close connection to the project at all. The client, a high-ranking government official, had asked someone to look for a company, and that person had asked someone else for help, who had asked someone else, who had finally asked the person they were meeting with. "Now *that* is not really the kind of person we want to work with, is it?" Director Deng asked rhetorically.

The Chinese term *kaopu*, most often rendered in English as "reliable," is an evaluation of the trustworthiness or predictability of a person or plan with whom one is beginning to engage. Combining the characters *kao* (靠), a verb meaning to approximate or come close to, and *pu* (谱), meaning a grid, score, or set of standards, *kaopu* is often uttered at the beginning stages of a relationship to gauge the character of someone one is just getting to know. Judging a person as "unreliable" (*bu kaopu*) would mean they are excessively boastful or impractical, that what they say or do is a departure from socially defined norms. It might mean they are a liar, that their plans are unrealistic, or that they cannot be depended on to do as they say. Thus encompassing notions of honesty and dependability, the term is often used in China to evaluate potential friends, where friendship is understood as combining practical benefit and emotional connection. In Angola, it sometimes took on racialized connotations, since the label of "unreliable" was frequently applied to Angolan workers perceived as excessively tardy or delinquent, implying a lack of diligence often contrasted against an ideal of Chinese industriousness. This discourse of Angolans, usually described in Chinese with racialized terms like *heiren* (Black person/people) or *heizi* (Black),⁹ as "unreliable" echoed uncannily with racial stereotypes of African "laziness" used by Europeans of an earlier era as justification for colonialism and slavery (Curtin 1973; Rönnbäck 2014).

In the context of business collaborations, *kaopu* was what my interlocutors used to describe a basic quality that they sought in Angolan partners. This was not due to racist ideas about African indolence—although such ideas may have been activated in other settings—but rather because

the imaginary of Angola as a moneymaking paradise, accessible only through crucial connections to forbidding structures of power, lent itself just as easily to fantasies of enrichment as it did to fears of deception. If well-connected Angolan individuals could appear as either protectors or predators, sometimes both, Chinese entrepreneurs could not be certain whether a man like John really held keys to so many doors or would actually show up to help in a moment of crisis. Chinese businesspeople may have had even more reason to doubt since they were often themselves engaged in various forms of brokerage and deception, morally condoned or not.¹⁰ Working in a climate of opacity, where dishonesty was the norm, Chinese entrepreneurs emphasized the “reliability” of potential collaborators as a way to highlight the importance of efficacy or predictability over sincerity or transparency.¹¹

Recent anthropological studies of mistrust have argued that trust and mistrust are not opposed; mistrust should not be understood as the absence of trust. Rather, mistrust and trust coexist in situations of uncertainty (Mühlfried 2018). While trust has traditionally been thought of as an attitude of engagement that strengthens social relations (Giddens 1990), mistrust is best conceived not as a refusal to engage but as a form of engagement in which distance, rather than proximity, is cultivated. It is thus “characterized by the paradox of ‘withholding-while-participating’” (Mühlfried 2018, 17). In his ethnography of mistrust as a “hypothesis” for handling risk and the uncontrollable, Matthew Carey (2017, 8) defines mistrust as “a general sense of the unreliability of a person or thing.” Arguing against the assumption that familiarity breeds trust, he shows how at his fieldsite in the Moroccan High Atlas Mountains, mistrust flourishes despite people living in close proximity to one another. People mistrust one another not because they are unfamiliar but because they do not pretend to know who others really are. A generalized disposition of mistrust therefore supports “a philosophy of rugged autonomy and moral equality that assumes other people to be both free and fundamentally uncontrollable” (10). Whereas for Carey the assumption of unknowability implies unpredictability (55), Chinese entrepreneurs at Northwest Construction continued to seek out some measure of predictability despite the secrecy or dishonesty of their collaborators.

As an engagement with indeterminacy, mistrust, or what Michael Bürge (2018) has called “missing trust” in the context of Northern Sierra Leoneans’ active search for economic opportunities, can be a way people face complexity and unpredictability, sometimes by cultivating relations with precisely those in whom they lack confidence. The tentative cultivation of mistrustful collaboration was illustrated well in a discussion I observed about a road-construction contract. Director Deng had asked me to call a man named Malaquias and tell him to come to the Northwest Construction store “to understand the situation of the roads project that he’s introducing to us.” Northwest Construction had

never worked on a road-building project before, but a friend of Deng’s, a Chinese private entrepreneur whose company did have the technical capacity to build roads, would also send representatives to the meeting. Deng was effectively serving as broker. However, by using the pronoun “we,” he did not make clear that there were two companies involved. From other experiences translating in meetings for Northwest Construction, this seemed to be common practice, a way of obscuring the many layers of subcontracting at work in construction projects.

A suited older man, perhaps in his sixties, Malaquias arrived at the store later that afternoon flanked by two bodyguards, who waited for him outside. He presented himself in an excessively dignified manner, holding his head up high and speaking with an authoritative tone. Deng explained to me that Malaquias had previously worked as a consultant (Pt. *fiscalizador*) on one of Northwest Construction’s largest projects, which is how they had met. During that time, the company had arranged for him to take a month-long visit to China. The official reason was so that he could inspect construction materials for the project, though he had also been given plenty of opportunities for shopping and entertainment. Gifts like this trip, combined with the relatively long duration of their relationship, seemed to have cemented a kind of friendship between Deng and Malaquias, though this did not preclude a measure of distrust.

Two Chinese representatives from the road-building company arrived to join the meeting: a female translator and a male engineer. They greeted Deng pertly and shook hands with Malaquias. Producing a printout of the tender announcement, Malaquias proceeded to go through a list of official bidding requirements. He explained that the company would need to provide copies of all their licenses, a formal proposal, and a bank guarantee, among other things. He said the governor of Uíge was a “friend” of his, therefore he was certain that “we” would get the contract. However, he would still need to furnish all the correct documents.

The employees of the road-building company presented to Malaquias two laminated and bound booklets: one contained all of the company’s official documents and the other a portfolio of their previous work. Malaquias flipped through them, nodding his head. He seemed satisfied, even impressed by their professionalism. Then he asked a doubtful question: “But are these roads you’ve built *good*? I don’t want those disposable roads [Pt. *estradas descartáveis*]. We need quality. Because you know there are some Chinese companies here that build roads and two years later they fall apart.” He turned to me, letting me know that he was aware of Deng’s position as broker of the deal: “I want to give this project to Deng because I know his company is good. But I don’t know *this* company at all.”

Chinese companies in Angola, as elsewhere in the world, held a popular reputation for products of inferior quality (see Schmitz 2014). The road just outside Shopping ChinAngola, where we were sitting, was to crumble to pieces just a few

months later during annual heavy rains. By questioning the quality of the company's roads, Malaquias evoked this global image of "shoddy" Chinese construction and put himself in a position of (moral) superiority to judge their work. Just as the translator began to murmur that her company's constructions were of high quality, Malaquias spoke over her to further bolster his negotiating advantage. Although she could understand, he said to me in Portuguese, "Tell them I have projects in Malanje, in Lunda Norte and Lunda Sul [Angolan provinces]. I can get the projects for them, but they will have to give me something as well." He then turned directly to the translator, "Do you understand?"

She nodded, her face expressionless, "Yes. Commission [Pt. *comissão*]." The word rolled off her tongue, the request apparently unsurprising. However, before agreeing to compensate Malaquias for his services, she turned quickly to her colleague and whispered in Chinese, "Do you think this guy's reliable?"

The colleague said nothing, and Malaquias continued to flip through the company's portfolio, asking further questions about materials and labor practices. He explained that the road company would need to provide a formal bid for the project, and he would travel to the provincial capital to submit it for them. Deng jumped in to vouch for his friends, explaining that the company had experience competing for public tenders and would not have any problem preparing the documents.

The translator interrupted to express her uncertainty directly, "are you sure that we'll get the contract?"

"I'm sure!" Malaquias answered without hesitation. He reiterated that he was friends with the governor. He then went on to explain that he would need to stay in Uíge for five days and that he would be bringing two other men with him—"I never travel alone, for security reasons." The three of them would need to stay in a hotel every night, eat out, fuel their car, and repair it in case it broke down. "Who's going to pay for all that?" he asked, then told the translator he would need 500,000 kwanzas (\$5,000 USD) to cover the costs of his trip. Moreover, he would need another 400,000 kwanzas to cover the fees for submitting the company's bid. "But I'll pick it up just before I leave Luanda," he said, assuming his new partners would agree, "I don't like to hold onto a lot of other people's money." By calling the money "other people's," Malaquias officially absolved himself from any claim that it would be for his personal use. However, he did not explain how he had come to such a large sum, nor did the Chinese partners ask him to specify. Doing so was futile in a situation in which both knew that at least part of the money was a payment for "facilitation," by him and perhaps others involved.

The translator looked at her colleague with eyes wide and mouth agape, shocked by the amount of money requested. "How can Black people be like this?!" She resorted to a racial generalization that recalled a stereotype I had heard among Northwest Construction employees about Angolans expecting their Chinese employers or partners to give

beyond the giver's threshold of generosity, often without giving back in return. This was frequently voiced as an outraged complaint: "They think we *should* be giving them money [Ch. *juede shi yinggai de!*]"¹² The statement of indignation implied that to expect financial gifts or assistance from Chinese friends, partners, or employers was morally wrong.

Although ritualized gift-giving is extremely common in Chinese contexts, as part of a moral economy in which social relations are fortified through the exchange of "human sentiment" (Ch. *renqing*) (Yang 1994, 70), the gift is ideally reciprocated and received as if it were unanticipated. However, as Ferguson (2013) has shown, in many African settings, material assistance is distributed without reciprocation through extended networks of patronage. In contexts where political power has traditionally been constituted through "wealth in people," social personhood can be achieved through agentive submission to a position of dependence (Bayart 2000; Miers and Kopytoff 1977). Different expectations about the circulation of material assistance, gifts, or favors are revealed in moral evaluations between Chinese and African actors around issues of gratitude or reciprocity (Sheridan 2018; Wu 2014). For example, one Angolan translator I met complained that the Chinese he worked for "are not very good people. They're friendly [Pt. *amigáveis*], but with money, they are *like this*," he held up a closed fist to indicate stinginess, a lack of generosity that for him was a moral failure.

Likewise, Chinese businesspeople like Director Deng, however cognizant of the relative poverty of some of their Angolan partners, frequently cast moral judgment on material or monetary requests they perceived to be excessive or in violation of (Chinese) social norms. He and other Chinese interlocutors usually accused Angolans who asked for too much of "having no shame" (Ch. *buyao lian*). If the Chinese term *lian* connotes a basic sense of respect necessary for maintenance of social relations (Kipnis 1995), an Angolan person who *buyao lian* would be one who has shown disregard for the relationship itself. Although Malaquias was surely offering a service that the Chinese road builders needed, his requested compensation apparently exceeded some boundary of social acceptability for them, thus further contributing to an atmosphere of mistrust.

"Later, later" (Pt. *Depois, depois*), came the translator's brusque reply to Malaquias, as she and her colleague stood up to leave. Meanwhile, Malaquias turned to me and said, "This is the problem with Chinese people. They distrust [Pt. *desconfiam!*]" Placing both hands on his chest, he stated as if unfairly accused, "I don't have a bad heart!" He apparently did not need to understand Chinese in order to sense the translator's attitude toward him, and he returned her generalization with one of his own.

That evening, on an after-dinner walk around the Northwest Construction compound, Deng criticized the translator from the road-building company for her openly suspicious attitude toward Malaquias. At the same time, he admitted that he could understand her doubts. Deng said Malaquias had helped Northwest Construction in many

ways, and he knew he needed money because he was poor and getting old, but Deng sometimes worried, paternalistically, about some of his “bad habits.” “If I give him money for something,” Deng explained, “I’m afraid he might go to a party, get drunk, and spend it all right away instead of using it for what it was intended.” He gave examples of other Angolans he had known with similar “habits” (Ch. *xiguan*)—employees of the company who borrowed money from their Chinese supervisors, only to run away with it or simply stop paying back the loan. “So, when we are working with Angolans,” Deng concluded, “We have to be a little bit doubtful about their trustworthiness [Ch. *xinyong*].”

Interestingly, both Angolan and Chinese partners in this negotiation displayed mistrustful attitudes. Moreover, neither party hid their distrust of the other, and yet they continued to work together. Malaquias expressed his doubts by questioning the quality of the company’s roads, while the translator repeatedly voiced her misgivings about his reliability. They also each appeared to have offended the other—he, by asking for what the translator took to be an outrageous sum of money to facilitate the company’s bid, and she, by regarding him with open suspicion and ultimately dismissing him rudely rather than courteously ending the conversation. Nevertheless, neither the translator nor Malaquias walked away from the collaboration. They eventually traveled together to Uíge province and ultimately won the construction bid. Similarly, although Director Deng claimed to harbor some distrust toward Malaquias or even Angolans in general, this had not stopped him from maintaining their “friendship” and calling him from time to time for business-related favors.

APPROXIMATING RELIABILITY

If mistrust is a way of relating to that which is unknown and indeterminate, Chinese entrepreneurs’ search for “reliability” was a similar kind of engagement with unknowability or opacity—the opacity of their potential collaborators’ backgrounds and motivations, as well as the opacity of Angola itself. Transparency and honesty were not often expected. However, another aspect of reliability may have been considered much more important by Chinese entrepreneurs: deliverability. Chinese managers at Northwest Construction frequently emphasized this, the ability to get done what one says one can do, in stories about people they considered to be reliable (*kaopu*). For instance, one afternoon at the Shopping ChinAngola store, I was approached by an Angolan customer making a large purchase of ceramic tiles. Handing me his business card, the man told me he worked for the Ministry of Commerce. He asked for a discount on his purchase, adding that we (the company) might need his help in the future. In the middle of our conversation, the customer received a phone call and exchanged a few pleasantries with the person on the other end. When he hung up, he told me: “That was the son of the president of the republic.” After the man had left, without getting his discount, I told Ma Hui, the accountant, about his performance of social capital. “That sounds very unreliable [*bu kaopu*],” Ma decided, then coun-

tered with a story of his own. A Chinese businesswoman we both knew had been trying to import furniture to Angola, but her container had been held up at customs. When she called a collaborator of hers, an Angolan general supposedly close to the president, the man immediately showed up and handed her \$40,000 USD in cash, telling her to resolve the issue herself. “Now *that’s* what I call reliable!” Ma Hui concluded emphatically.

While Ma seemed to think that money was more reliable than anything else, for others, nonmonetary capital could also be taken as evidence of reliability. During my fieldwork, the Angolan collaborator Director Deng considered to be most reliable was a man named Silvio. Although I translated at meetings with him several times, I never learned much about his background or whether he held a government position himself. He did not dress in a suit, like Malaquias, nor did he hire bodyguards, but he exuded a certainty in the effectiveness of his connections that allowed him to gain Deng’s confidence. One day, Silvio came to the Northwest Construction store at Deng’s request, to discuss the possibility of building a commercial water purification facility. They would bring equipment from China, Deng explained, but needed Silvio to use his connections (*guanxi*) with the head of the public water utility company. “We’ve rented a piece of land across the street from the water treatment center of EPAL [the water utility],” Deng said, masking the fact that it was actually a friend, a private entrepreneur from Fujian, who had rented the land. “Trucks pass by all the time to pick up water, so we can capture some of their business, and eventually we can grow into the market for bottled water.”

Silvio said the project seemed feasible, although “we” would have to be careful not to offend any of the generals and government administrators who he said owned all the land in that area. “There are a lot of possibilities there,” he said, “Even José Eduardo has a milk factory there. So we’d better not build a milk factory and compete with him!” He evoked both familiarity and playful criticism by using the president’s given names, rather than an official title (Schubert 2017, 120). Deng told Silvio, as I translated, that “we” had already started building a facility on the land we rented, but had to stop. The problem was that we’d been relying on the second-in-command (Ch. *er ba shou*) at the water utility, so when the director found out, he shut it all down.

“That won’t be a problem for us, don’t worry,” Silvio reassured him, “I’m not going through the water utility. I have a good relationship with the mayor of Luanda. We’ll get the mayor’s approval for this project, and then whenever the authorities try to give us trouble, we’ll call him and he’ll tell them to leave us alone. In fact, it’s not the water utility who has power [Pt. *quem manda*]; it’s the minister of water and energy. We’ll have to ask him for a license, because this is a kind of resource exploitation—you know that, right? But I’ll take care of all of that. I’ll go to him to request a license, and he will agree to give us one. Then he’ll tell me to wait. When he asks me to wait, he’ll be expecting a sign from me. And it’s at that moment that I’ll offer him a percentage of

the profits. He expects to receive this percentage, because he has to eat [Pt. *porque ele tem que comer*].” Silvio explained that both the mayor and the minister would become “partners” in the venture, entitling them to each receive 1 percent or 1.5 percent, but without being required to invest anything. That, he said, is how we would ensure we had their protection.

It was refreshing, for me, to hear Silvio explain in such detail how he would “open doors” for Northwest Construction’s proposed project. Unlike some of the other individuals who had claimed powerful connections, he did not describe how he was related to the high-ranking government officials he mentioned, but his matter-of-fact explanation gave an effect of transparency that allowed him to appear honest and experienced. At least this was what had convinced me. Later in the day, I asked Deng whether he thought Silvio was a reliable collaborator. “I think he’s very *kaopu*,” said Deng, “He knows all kinds of people! Once he came to my office with a friend of his who he said needed help importing chemicals from China. I asked what he was importing, and he wrote down the words in Portuguese. Of course, I couldn’t understand them, so I asked him, ‘What exactly are you trying to do with these chemicals?’ He pulled out a piece of paper. It looked just like a US dollar bill, though there was something not quite right about it. He said, ‘If we get these chemicals, and wash this paper in them, it will turn into a US dollar!’ I said, ‘No, no. That’s illegal! I can’t be involved in something like that!’ But that just shows the level of people he’s connected to.”

For some, counterfeiting currency would be the ultimate sign of deceptiveness, but for Deng, Silvio’s involvement in a highly dishonest and illegal activity was a sign of his reliability. This could not be due to Deng’s and Silvio’s shared participation in a shadowy criminal underworld, since Silvio’s proposition in this case went beyond the boundaries of respectability Deng wanted to maintain for his company. Although he refused to become involved in this particular business venture, however, Deng had learned from Silvio’s proposal that he possessed strategic connections that could prove effective in other potential collaborations. Reliability thus emerged as a positive evaluation not for Silvio’s honesty or the truthfulness of his claims, but for his effectiveness as a partner, the deliverability of his promises. To be reliable was not a judgment of one’s character in general, but one’s ability to fulfill the terms of the business partnership. This, more than the interactional affection typical of Chinese business friendships (Wu 2014, 107), was what would be necessary to turn social connections into viable roads.

CONCLUSION


In Angola a decade after the end of the civil war, a context in which business and politics were highly personalized, Chinese entrepreneurs found themselves searching for partners who they could rely on. Hinging their aspirations on an imaginary of the Angolan economy as a vast field of untapped resources, guarded by opaque structures of power, they constantly navigated propositions by local bro-

kers who promised access or threatened to block it. Unlike Appel’s (2012, 439) American oil industry expats in Equatorial Guinea, who sought to “disentangle” themselves from implication in corrupt practices, with the ring-fenced compound a symbol of this separation, Chinese managers at Northwest Construction eagerly inserted themselves within the “web of sociopolitical relations required for . . . extraction.” Indeed, the image of the drill offered by Director Deng points to his unabashed engagement in economic exploitation, including but not limited to resource extraction. For Chinese managers at Northwest Construction, paying bribes or commissions, although sometimes criticized as forms of “corruption” (Ch. *fubai*), were often accepted as practical and necessary means to build relationships and expand business.

A more pressing concern for my Chinese interlocutors was voiced through the notion of “reliability.” This was the term used in common expressions of doubt from Chinese businesspeople as they attempted collaborations with Angolans who offered to smooth over thorny bureaucratic procedures or make connections to lucrative deals. The repeated questioning of potential collaborators’ reliability revealed a widespread attitude of mistrust among Chinese entrepreneurs, amplified by a general atmosphere of opacity surrounding Angolan economic opportunities and political relations. If a company like Northwest Construction could only “survive” in the Angolan market by expanding business, and it relied on Angolan partners to do so, it had to work with local collaborators—or “friends,” one might say—despite mistrusting them. Similarly, though it has not been my focus here, Angolans seeking to make a living or get rich themselves developed partnerships with Chinese individuals or companies while continuing to harbor suspicions. Thus, the friendships examined here are not those in which trust and care formed a foundation for relationships both affective and instrumental (Chang 2013). Rather, mutually beneficial collaborations persisted alongside reciprocal doubts, and when a person was considered to be reliable, it was not due to the sincerity of his words or purity of his motivations, but because he appeared to be able to deliver on his promises.

Angola has become the recipient of the largest number of Chinese loans of any African country—over \$40 billion USD in a period of seventeen years (CARI 2017). It has also been subject to intense international scrutiny for its political leaders’ engagement in practices labeled as corrupt, with Isabel dos Santos, daughter of former president José Eduardo dos Santos and “Africa’s richest woman” (Dolan 2013), recently exposed by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists for embezzling billions of dollars in state funds (Garside 2020). The entrepreneurial explorations of Northwest Construction show that it is not only political elites who garner personal benefits from business deals. Rather, the work of brokerage and facilitation, through which “ten percents” are accumulated, becomes a mode of livelihood for a wide range of Angolan and Chinese actors, differently positioned within social and political

networks. Questions of reliability, and the situations of reciprocal dependence and exploitation in which they surface, offer clues as to how infrastructures of mutually instrumentalized “friendship” are constructed amid a widespread atmosphere of mistrust.

Cheryl Mei-ting Schmitz  *Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, Boltzmannstrasse 22, Berlin, 14195, Germany; cschmitz@mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de*

NOTES

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1. To protect the privacy of those who spoke to me in the field, I use pseudonyms for all personal and corporate names
2. Here, I translate *lu* (路) quite literally as “road,” but it could also be translated more abstractly as “channel,” “path,” or “way.” *Luzi* (路子) (road) is also a colloquial expression for instrumental personal connections in Mandarin Chinese.
3. By comparison, Emily Martin ([1986] 2014) has described how, in “traditional” Chinese society, goods and money were exchanged in order to pave “roads” of interaction. The end goal would have been sociality, not personal gain.
4. China International Fund (CIF), a private organization with close ties to the Angolan and Chinese states, provided additional loans and contracts for Angolan government projects (Levkowitz, Ross, and Warner 2009).
5. Although Angola certainly benefits from oil resources and high per capita incomes, the idea that it is a “rich country” obviously overlooks the grinding poverty affecting the vast majority of the population. For a discussion of land distribution among MPLA elites, see Soares de Oliveira (2015, chapter 3).
6. Indeed, other Chinese staff at Northwest Construction used a similar phrasing—*zuan yige loudong* (lit: “drill” or squeeze through a loophole)—to describe exploiting a weakness in the legal system, for example, paying a bribe to get someone out of jail.
7. Smith (2007) offers a similar example of shared imaginaries contributing to fraudulent moneymaking activities in his ethnography of corruption in Nigeria.

8. The Chinese term *pianzi* is a nominalization of the verb *pian*, meaning to deceive, swindle, or cheat, often connoting commercial deception with the repercussion of monetary losses.
9. Although I have translated these terms somewhat literally here, it is debatable whether they are equivalent in Chinese and English, since categories of race and Blackness have very different historical and social lives in China versus Europe and the United States (see Lan 2011, chapter 2).
10. Chinese migrant entrepreneurs may have also been distrustful of one another because of a general trend toward instrumentalization of social relations in post-reform China (Wu 2014, 89).
11. Jullien (2000, 198) has noted that in the Confucian *Analects*, speech that inspires confidence between friends need not be truthful, but must be effective: “the point is not that man says what he thinks but that he does what he says.”
12. See also Sheridan (2018, 254).

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