

DRIESSEN MIRIAM. — *TALES OF HOPE, TASTES OF BITTERNESS:
CHINESE ROAD BUILDERS IN ETHIOPIA*

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DRIESSEN Miriam. — *Tales of Hope, Tastes of Bitterness: Chinese Road Builders in Ethiopia*. Hong Kong, Hong Kong University Press, 2019, 198 p., bibl., index.

- 1 Miriam Driessen's *Tales of Hope, Tastes of Bitterness* is a welcome addition to the growing body of ethnographic research on Africa-China connections. Rather than appealing to sensationalist labels like “neo-colonialism” or a “new empire,” which have circulated repeatedly in writing on “China in Africa,” Driessen takes an anthropological starting point, building her analysis from a fine-grained reading of the perceptions and reflections of the Chinese migrants she met in Ethiopia. It is their hope and bitterness that the title evokes. Although the aspirations and disappointments of Chinese road builders are central to this account, the book's contributions far exceed simply presenting a Chinese perspective on migration to Africa.
- 2 Driessen's study is based on long-term fieldwork in Ethiopia, primarily in 2011 and 2012, as well as on a return visit in 2017. Significantly, her field site was not an administrative unit like a city or town, nor an organization; instead, it was a road project, where Driessen says she “learned to think and talk in kilometers” (p. 26). This methodological choice reflects the primary way China engages with many African countries: through infrastructure construction. Moving along various points on the road, the author was able to observe multiple engagements between Ethiopian and Chinese actors, from joking and quarreling between workers and technicians on the job, to the layers of subcontracting between Chinese state-owned and private enterprises, to the interpretations and complaints of Ethiopian engineers, lawyers, and

local residents. Her time was divided roughly equally between Ethiopian and Chinese work camps, and her mastery of both Chinese and Ethiopian languages is evident throughout the book. She regularly refers to local terminology, and her analysis includes several careful readings of documents, her sharp eye keenly discerning how mistranslations and omissions hint at Chinese managerial logics.

- 3 The seven substantive chapters of the book have been elegantly composed such that each builds upon the last to advance Driessen's argument and provide a fuller picture of Chinese-Ethiopian relations. The first chapter, following the Introduction, discusses Chinese workers' reasons for migrating to Ethiopia, making the critical point that they are not drawn by imaginaries of an exotic destination but rather "pushed" by social pressures related to recent changes in China. Indeed, one of the most important contributions of this book is its careful explanation of shifts in domestic China that impact how China globalizes. The optimism of the early reform period has given way to an anxious competition for upward mobility in which everyone is left to fend for themselves. In this context, the rural migrant workers Driessen engaged with—and she notes that the term "migrant" may be misleading since it implies permanent relocation (p. 34)—chose Ethiopia as a somewhat arbitrary site of displacement, where they could work toward achieving (monetary) security in China, a place where they felt increasingly marginalized and left behind.
- 4 Chapters 2, 3, and 4 focus on questions of discipline—of Chinese, Ethiopians, and the separations between them. By parsing distinctions in company structure and work conditions between the various state-owned and private contractors involved in the project, Driessen demolishes a common imaginary of Chinese actors in Africa as homogenous and united. However, she also stresses how important it was for Chinese managers to maintain an image of integrity, in terms of both coherence and moral uprightness (p. 68).
- 5 They did this by policing the behavior of rural Chinese migrants and maintaining distance between racial groups. Intimate relations between Chinese men and Ethiopian women were perceived as particularly threatening to the conceptual and physical boundaries managers erected between mutable social categories. The notion of "racial distancing" (p. 76) is one of Driessen's key conceptual innovations, as she argues that maintaining distance from a racialized African other becomes ever more crucial as Chinese nationalism, tinged by anxiety at the beginning of the reform period, has evolved into a proud patriotism in confrontation with the West. A sense of national superiority is upheld through images of the chaste or economically dominant (in the case of transnational marriages) Chinese man. Moreover, the social distance between Chinese and Ethiopians was necessary in order to maintain strict racial segregation and differential treatment on the worksite. Chinese supervisors, many of whom had been manual laborers in China, frequently lamented Ethiopian workers' failure to abide by norms of productivity or attitudes toward work they considered essential to national development. At the same time, Driessen points out, Chinese ideas of Ethiopians as indolent or lacking a desire for self-improvement conveniently justified their exploitation (p. 83). The author draws parallels with European colonialism where relevant but is careful to also indicate how Chinese activities differ.
- 6 The next two chapters build upon the discussion of labor relations introduced in chapter 4 to explore how, contrary to media tropes of pitiful Africans preyed upon by powerful Chinese, Ethiopian workers at Driessen's field site actively resisted Chinese

management, sometimes to the point that Chinese managers felt victimized themselves. Chapter 5 reveals how Chinese managerial practices, inconsistently enforced and often based on personal whim, inspired acts of defiance among Ethiopian workers. Descriptions in these sections of both subtle provocations, like drivers deliberately leaving bags of khat—a stimulant not to be consumed while driving—visible on the dashboards of their vehicles, to collective actions, like striking or deserting one company for another, are delightful to read (pp. 116-121). Moreover, such examples demonstrate how Chinese actors lacked the local political clout that their colonial predecessors in Africa may have possessed. This becomes even more evident in chapter 6, a climactic point in the narrative, which deals with how Ethiopian workers confronted their Chinese employers in local courts, leaving Chinese managers both confused and defeated. In this chapter, Driessen highlights the significance of not only the domestic Chinese experience but also the local Ethiopian context in conditioning the dynamics she witnessed. While Chinese migrants expected the local government to protect foreign investors, as they thought the Chinese state had during the reform period, they found state actors, especially in Tigray, much more willing to side with Ethiopian workers in legal disputes (p. 152). Ethiopian laborers, far from the “weak” whose weapons have been classically studied, thus drew on the strengths of their local connections to discipline Chinese management.

- 7 The final chapter returns to the title and main question of the book: why do Chinese migrants who come to Ethiopia with such high hopes end up so bitterly disappointed, and how do we interpret their narratives of suffering? Driessen’s answer includes an analysis of the divergence between migrants’ expectations based on their experiences in China and the realities they encountered in Ethiopia. Chief among these are understandings of development assistance that failed to account for the agency and perceived ingratitude of Ethiopian actors. Moreover, Driessen situates migrants’ grievances within a broader history of China-Africa relations, in which Chinese working in Africa, once the “experts” of the Mao era, have been demoted to the status of mere “peasant workers” today (p. 168). No longer heroes abroad and missing out on prosperity at home, her interlocutors felt they had no choice but to work in Africa, and even that might not guarantee social survival in China (p 174).
- 8 *Tales of Hope, Tastes of Bitterness* displays Driessen’s ethnographic talent for combining the personal biographies of her interlocutors with broader historical and social contextualization, for extending sympathy to both Ethiopian and Chinese actors without romanticizing their struggles. She offers original analyses of many topics frequently mentioned but so far insufficiently analyzed in discussions of Africa-China relations, such as the status of transnational couples and their Chinese-Ethiopian children (p. 72), the politics of racial terminology in Chinese (p. 85), and the modes of communication used between Ethiopian workers and their bosses (p. 106). One slight shortcoming of the book is that Ethiopian subjectivities are afforded less depth, though the author admits that her focus is on Chinese perspectives, and she certainly provides evidence of the creative and powerful actions of Ethiopians who work with Chinese companies. A highly readable, engaging, and humanizing text, this book would be appropriate for general audiences, for undergraduate teaching, as well as for advanced scholars seeking a nuanced understanding of Chinese migration and investment, which seem to be affecting nearly every corner of the continent.

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