The Tiger in the Cage:
Discourse Surrounding China’s Engagement in Kenya

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Abstract

Using as a point of departure Max Weber’s concept of the “iron cage” of capitalism and Marcel Mauss’ notions of reciprocity, along with more recent works on China-Africa relations, this study aims to counter dominant Western narratives that frame China as a neocolonial power and suggests some explanations as to why such narratives gain so much traction in international circles. Such narratives are provided support by comparisons with the European colonization of Africa, but often fail to take into account the differences in China’s foreign policies, as well as the potential for growth and development allowed by Chinese engagement. This study focuses on how these narratives take shape within the context of the author’s field work in Nairobi, Kenya among local Kenyans and Chinese ex-pats. Ultimately, the study finds that Sino-Kenyan interpersonal relations remain strained as a result of unbalanced reciprocation in various forms of exchange, which are viewed by many Kenyans through the lens of these dominant narratives as being representative of an inherently “Chinese” characteristic of greediness and asociality.

Keywords: China, Kenya, Reciprocity, Iron Cage, Neocolonialism, Sino-Africa

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Introduction

After leaving the frigid cold of Uppsala, Sweden, a five hour layover in the Istanbul airport, and two sleepless flights, I finally arrived at Jomo Kenyatta International Airport. As I waited in the customs line, hoping I had properly completed the necessary forms for my visa, I basked in the slightly humid warmth of Nairobi in late January. I was still unsure of what exactly I should expect or look for during my first fieldwork, but as I passed through the customs line and retrieved my luggage, I felt a wave of relief, even as I continued on to find my way to what would be my home for the next few months. I took the first taxi I could find, and did not bother to negotiate the price of transportation, since I was severely sleep deprived at this point, and my driver and I slowly worked out a route to my destination.

Upon arriving at the apartment in Kilimani, my relief quickly fled as I found that my hosts were not home; they had travelled to Mombassa for the weekend and would not be reachable until the next week. Flustered and anxious by the prospect of having arrived on a separate continent without a place to stay, and perhaps without a field site, I found a hotel in the central business district to gather myself and make a plan. After sending some emails and getting my bearings, I went down to the lobby to find my friend and former Kiswahili teacher, John, waiting for me. This was the first familiar face I had seen, and once again I felt relieved and prepared to move forward. John and I talked for a bit, brainstorming alternative strategies and backup plans before I excused myself to get some sleep.

Over the next few days, I stayed at a house normally advertised for tourists located in the coffee fields on the outskirts of the city, where I gathered some preliminary data on Kenyan perceptions of Chinese. The lush environment and cool air was like paradise after my stressful arrival, and helped me to develop my theoretical approach for the coming weeks, even though I was about an hour’s drive from anything resembling my intended field site. After a few days, I was able to contact my hosts, and after a flurry of apologies for the miscommunication, I was warmly welcomed to our apartment in Kilimani, from where I based the majority of my research.

I found that during my time in the field the sort of emotional boom and bust of things going my way and then going terribly wrong would become a common occurrence. Such unpredictability in the field should have been expected, and while it could at times lead me to question my methods and even the possibility of accumulating useful data, it also forced me to become flexible and discover new avenues of inquiry I would not have otherwise considered. I
would not be the first, nor will I likely be the last to say that field work is an extremely reflexive practice during which the researcher examines herself as much, if not more than she does her object of study. The opportunity for such introspection cannot be understated, and it is an experience that can not only improve the quality of one’s research, but also that of one’s worldview.

In addition, the flexibility allowed by anthropological methods allowed me to change the focus of my research as easily and frequently as became necessary. My initial research question centered around how Sino-Kenyan interpersonal relations contributed to cultural appropriation and adaptation, but it became quickly apparent that social interactions between Chinese and Kenyans are fairly rare. Thus my focus shifted to perceptions these groups have of each other, how such perceptions are formed, and what they mean for Kenyan society as a whole. The following is the result of my time in the field and an analysis of the data I collected regarding how China’s presence in Kenya is viewed by locals and the peculiarity of these perceptions in contrast to those regarding Western intervention in the past and present.

**Setting the Scene**

The data for this thesis was gathered over a ten week period in the field from January to April of 2016, obtained primarily through participant observation, but on occasion from semi-formal interviews. During this time, I lived in an apartment in the Kilimani district of Nairobi with a number of Chinese nationals, who both lived and worked in this apartment for China-Africa Friendship Workshop¹, a Chinese social enterprise that walked the line between non-profit organization and private business. The individuals living in China-Africa Friendship Workshop would come and go over various lengths of time, but there were generally around 6-8 others living in the apartment while I was there. China-Africa Friendship Workshop provided an interesting and thought-provoking environment from which to base my research, due to the ambiguous and liminal spaces it occupied; it was neither a non-profit nor a private business, the apartment was both residence and workplace, and the putative mission statement of the organization was not always mirrored by its practices.

The apartment we lived in is fairly large for Nairobi and served as the hub from which China-Africa Friendship Workshop’s operations were based. It is made up of two floors on the

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¹ I have changed the actual name of the organization to protect the identities of its employees and the integrity of the organization itself.
top story of the apartment building, and contains three bathrooms and four bedrooms, though several of us lived in spaces that might not technically be considered bedrooms. One of my Chinese friends, whom I refer to as Chang Bo, stayed in a sort of alcove with a ply-wood door covering the entrance, while I slept on a mattress on the floor of what would probably have otherwise served as a living room space. The apartment also sports a washing machine, large windows that illuminated the entire apartment, and three balconies overlooking the neighborhood. However, while it may be spacious, it is by no means palatial. Most of the plumbing suffers from extensive corrosion and leaks profusely, and the electricity and water cuts out fairly frequently, sometimes on a weekly basis for up to several days at a time. The lower level is dominated by the “office”, a large open space that has been furnished with large tables and desk chairs for the employees to work at. Adjacent to this is the kitchen and small dining room, which is in a perpetual state of disarray despite the tenacious efforts of Lila, the house girl, who does most of the cooking and cleaning in the apartment.

China-Africa Friendship Workshop, as an organization, is fairly ambiguous to my eye. Since my initial research focus had been on Chinese integration into Kenyan culture and personal interactions between Chinese and Kenyans, when I first learned about China-Africa Friendship Workshop from a news article, the organization’s mission statement seemed almost too good to be true: “To better integrate Chinese into Africa by reducing the social and environmental frictions of Chinese foreign investment” (from China-Africa Friendship Workshop’s Facebook page). However, as my time in the field went on, it seemed to me that their goals were more centered around the facilitation of establishing new Chinese businesses seeking to profit in the Kenyan market through loopholes in Kenyan tax code and labor laws. While China-Africa Friendship Workshop also contributes to many studies on China’s presence in Africa and hosts charity events, their status as a non-profit organization seems tenuous at best. Even the organization’s efforts at “integrat[ing] Chinese to Africa” is overshadowed by the fact that its employees rarely, if ever, interact with Kenyans on more than a professional level. When I questioned Jie Xinyi, the founder and CEO of China-Africa Friendship Workshop, about this, he told me that, “I know it’s important for integrate [sic], but for myself on a personal level, you will see, I actually do not hang out with many African friends at all. I may hang out with more Koreans, Japanese, Americans, Europeans, but Kenyans, very few.” He explained that the reason for this was that he found he did not have much in common with Kenyans, but this
seemed a strange sentiment to have for one who claims to advocate China-Africa integration, and he did not seem to find it hypocritical. The organization is certainly not a means of acquiring wealth for anyone internally, but it appeared to me as if the stated mission of integration is more of a means for China-Africa Friendship Workshop and its members to achieve their own goals and aspirations while avoiding the treacherous bog that is Kenyan tax code.

Despite my own misgivings regarding China-Africa Friendship Workshop’s activities, they do enormous work in wildlife conservation, and the connections I made with other Chinese because of them cannot be understated. A significant number of young Chinese professionals live in Nairobi to work at the growing number of tele-communications and construction companies sprouting up around the country, and nearly any Chinese ex-pat in Kenya will have at least heard of China-Africa Friendship Workshop, if not worked with them in some capacity.

Most days, I would spend a couple hours in the morning getting an idea of my apartment-mates’ plans for the day, and if I did not join them on their various excursions, I would usually meet up with my local contacts. These consisted of a group of young Kenyan men, aged from 20-35 years old, and I would generally find them chewing qat on the corner a few blocks from our apartment. We would usually sit on old car seats and talk for a while drinking soda or Indian-inspired chai tea, and then move on somewhere else. I would often accompany them on their errands around the city, or to meet friends of theirs in Kibera or Kawangware, other districts of Nairobi generally referred to as the slums of the city. We would make almost daily visits to a sort of unofficial community center in Kibera known as Tumaini (“hope” in Kiswahili), which was made up of a collection of small shops, a public toilet, an area for collecting and sorting trash, and several buildings for community use. One structure, a rectangular building covered with corrugated metal, is a makeshift shelter in which young men might stay the night if they did not have homes of their own. Across the central square, is Xavier in the Garden of Eden a building with wooden walls, equipped with a TV and several rows of wooden benches, where youths watch the pirated films being sold around the city. Off in one corner is a section referred to as “the Garden of Eden,” where some of the young men go to smoke marijuana beneath the shade of some scraggly, yet picaresque acacia trees. Just outside the entrance to Tumaini, to one
side one will find a collection of auto mechanics, where piles of tires and engine parts lay about waiting to be fitted to cars. On the other side, a large open market contains shops for clothes, cooking instruments, pirated DVDs, and small electronics. A back entrance to Tumaini leads to a collection of fruit stalls and some small businesses.

On several occasions, I travelled outside of Nairobi, once to Mombassa on Kenya’s East coast, once to Kisumu on the shores of Lake Victoria, and a handful of trips to the countryside of Kenya’s interior. During these excursions, I usually stayed at hotels, hostels, or friends’ homes. These trips outside of the capital allowed me to compare opinions and perspectives with people from different parts of the country, as well as to see how interactions between Chinese and Kenyans may differ depending on the landscape or the proximity to large cities, but the vast majority of my data comes from my experiences in Nairobi.

It is important to note at this point that while many Kenyans, in my own experience, perceive Chinese to be a homogenous group, Chinese nationals in Kenya make up a widely diverse population, coming from disparate provinces (as well as Hong Kong and Taiwan), working in different industries, and holding a variety of cultural beliefs and values. The same can also be said for many Chinese perceptions of Kenyans, and Africans more generally. For this reason, when references are made to “Chinese culture” or “the Chinese,” the intent is not to portray “Chineseness” in a homogenous image, but rather to invoke the perceptions of Chinese immigrants held by my Kenyan informants and vice versa. Therefore, these instances should be read, “the Chinese, as perceived by my Kenyan informants,” etc.

Another important note is that while my Chinese informants were made up of a fairly equal number of both men and women, my Kenyan informants were almost all male. This was not the result of a conscious decision on my part, but rather a matter of Kenyan men being more accessible to me; Kenyan women are generally expected to run households and raise children. In addition to this, one of Kenya’s biggest employment sectors is the service industry, which often employs women as cooks, cleaners, and other service occupations, while men in the service sector often occupy positions that require less regular labor, such as repairmen or other piecemeal work. Unemployed and underemployed men can often be found on street corners while they wait to hear of new opportunities, and this is how I met many of my Kenyan informants. As such, readers should take into account that the Kenyan perspectives I recount are
from a primarily male gaze, and this is also an aspect that should be adjusted in future research, so as to approach the topics below from a more balanced perspective.

In addition to the primarily male gaze of this study, it should be noted that much of the opinions and perspectives described below lean closer to those of my Kenyan informants. My intent is not to imply that my own opinions mirror those of my Kenyan informants, but rather, I was able to spend much more time with them than my Chinese informants, who were often working during the day.

**Language and Methodological Considerations**

Language barriers were perhaps the greatest obstacles during my time in the field. While English is one of Kenya’s official languages, everyday conversations are usually held in Kiswahili or any of the multitude of other languages spoken around the country. My own knowledge of Kiswahili was elementary to say the least, and even this was not helpful to me if someone began speaking Luhya or Kikuyu, which was a fairly common occurrence. Worse still was my understanding of Mandarin. Over time I slowly began to recognize certain words, but nothing close to comprehension. I was usually lucky enough to have someone with me who could translate, but this only provided me with a thin understanding of peoples’ conversations, and I believe that because of this, I ended up missing out on a great deal of what could have been important ethnographic data.

Another difficulty was the fact that I was, in a sense, observing two separate populations with very little cross-over or interaction. On the one hand, there were those living in China-Africa Friendship Workshop, and on the other, my Kenyan informants living in Kibera and other slum areas of the city. While these two groups were incredibly different in terms of socio-economic status, cultural background, and occupation, they provided sharp contrast to each other’s opinions and perspectives. These two groups only interacted on rare occasion, and these were usually as a result of their mutual association with me, or a chance encounter on the street, and I found myself trying to balance the amount of time I spent with each, which tended to force me to spend certain times of day with each group, and again, perhaps missing out on potentially significant data.

While these aspects of my fieldwork presented challenges on the one hand, they also provided useful opportunities on the other. As Vincent Debaene describes in his book, *Far Afield* (2014), many early anthropologists struggled with how to frame their findings so that their
audiences back home could understand the significance entailed within. The difficulty in this lies in the fact that the anthropologist, as an outsider, must not only obtain a firm grasp of the insider’s perspective, but must then manage to translate this perspective into terms that will make sense to her colleagues and audiences back home (Debaene, 2014:106). As such, anthropologists generally need to occupy a somewhat liminal space between their informants and audiences. Given the degree that my two target populations remain, for the most part, isolated from each other, I found that I could occupy this not-outside but not-not-outside space with relative ease. To my Kenyan informants, even my elementary understanding of Kiswahili, as well as my time I spent with them designated me as somehow closer to being Kenyan than the Chinese ex-pats I often asked them about. Some of my Kenyan informants even insisted on introducing me to new people as John Kamau, a Kenyan (Kikuyu) name that they thought suited my character and indicated my relationship with them. My Chinese informants, perhaps due to my Caucasian complexion and Western education, felt a closer affinity to me than to locals. Each group felt comfortable discussing their perceptions and opinions of the other with me, perhaps because they perceived me as being closer to themselves than the groups being discussed. I was, perhaps, similar to “the stranger” social type described by Georg Simmel (1908); a figure who is not originally from the social group, but can function as a sort of confidant to those within the group. As a result of this position I inhabited, some of my informants would come to me with thoughts and ideas that they felt they could not broach with others. At the same time, the thoughts shared with me often took on a more pedagogical feel than if I were an “insider”; many of my informants assumed that I would need explanations of many things that they might assume go without saying. However, being a repository for so much confidential information raised some ethical quandaries for my data collection, and also made me uneasy at times, not knowing what or whom I could discuss.

In addition to this liminal position, I was often categorized as the white, male university student that I am. The label of mzungu (white person) followed me everywhere I went, and while this status was beneficial in some ways, such as people being eager to talk to and spend time with me, I became uncomfortable with it, as people often viewed me as a sort of “white savior”, a man of means who holds the ability to lift others out of poverty. I have always abhorred this categorization and the way it is often praised in much Western media, but it was a label that could not easily be shirked, and I often found myself going to great lengths to try and
talk to people as social equals and demonstrate my ability to empathize with their experiences. Such efforts were usually fruitless, as I was told over and over that “all white men have money” and it became painfully obvious how little I understood of the struggles faced by many of my informants, so I was forced to take such perceptions into consideration whenever I met new people.

**Dramatis Personae**

For the sake of anonymity, I have changed the names of all of my informants. This was not part of my agreements with any of my informants, as both my Chinese and Kenyan informants were unfamiliar with such practices and seemed ambivalent to the idea when I proposed concealing their identities. However, during the writing process, I felt that some of the personal notes regarding some of my informants are best left unconnected to the actual people I discuss. While most of my Chinese informants had adopted Western names for when they travelled outside of China, I have further changed these to protect their identities. Below are brief descriptions of the individuals that appear most often and most prominently throughout the rest of this thesis, and with whom I became most well-acquainted.

**Xavier** -

21 years old at the time of my fieldwork, Xavier was a primary informant and gatekeeper for me. Xavier identified as a Kisii and a Rastafarian. When I first met him, he approached me as I passed by, claiming that he was the “King of Kilimani”, a title that seemed to be not necessarily acknowledged to all of those around him, though he certainly had a wide-reaching network of friends and acquaintances in Kilimani and the surrounding neighborhoods. On this first meeting, he had recently gotten out of jail, but it was never entirely clear what his offense had been. On one occasion I bailed him out of jail after being arrested for drunken and disorderly conduct, and he seemed to have become fairly familiar with the Kenyan judicial system. When I asked him what he did for a living, he said he was a “hustler”, by which he meant he lived day by day, either selling drugs or doing odd jobs here and there. Without a house of his own, he would usually stay at friends’ places in Kibera or Kawangware. He often spoke in platitudes and repeated lines from songs or scripture, and would drink and smoke marijuana in large quantities. As such, his life before I met him remains a bit of a mystery to me because many of his stories seemed to contradict each other. However, his responses to my questions were often quite informative and gave me new directions in which to move forward.
Connor -
Connor, a Luhya, was 24 years old at the time of my fieldwork, and I met him through Xavier. He works as a freelance electrician/plumber in Kilimani and the surrounding areas, and we would often ride in his car with him as he went between jobs. Connor lived alone in a small two-room apartment in Kawangware, not far from his father and sister, whom I was able to meet on one occasion. Connor was often eager to introduce me to other friends of his and to invite me to social gatherings in his neighborhood. While generally quiet and somewhat shy, Connor’s personality helped to filter Xavier’s seemingly constant flow of information into more digestible and relevant thoughts. His humble demeanor meant that he did not talk about himself much, but his personal stories were more comprehensive than Xavier’s.

Chang Bo -
Chang Bo was 24 during my fieldwork, and he was one of the Chinese students living with me at China-Africa Friendship Workshop. He worked part-time for China-Africa Friendship Workshop on various projects for about 8 weeks, while also working on his own projects, which aimed to bring Chinese students to Kenya in order for them to help at nearby orphanages and learn about African cultures. However, as far as I have heard, these plans never came to fruition. He originally came from Sichuan province in Southern China, had studied for a time in Poland, and had also travelled fairly extensively around the world. As a result, he was more open to new experiences than most of the other Chinese we lived with. Extremely outgoing, Chang Bo accompanied me on several excursions around Kenya, during which I could learn about his perspectives as a young Chinese man.

Ai Chun -
23 years old at the time of my fieldwork, Ai Chun was the only Chinese student living at China-Africa Friendship Workshop who had a background in African Studies. She was very interested in learning about different peoples and cultures in Kenya, and we often had conversations in the apartment during which she would ask me to explain to her cultural norms and beliefs. These conversations helped me to grasp how Chinese nationals may perceive concepts such as witchcraft outside of the cultural contexts in which they often exist, as well as how Africa is portrayed in a Chinese academic environment. However, the fact that she would approach me with her questions about Africans, rather than Africans themselves, seems to indicate that she did not consider them to be reliable sources or that she shared some of the negative prejudices
regarding Africans that I found were so common among Chinese. Instead, she would ask me to interpret the actions and beliefs of locals, perhaps because, as I realized is the case with many of my informants, my status as a white male university student is highly regarded in many ways.

Jie Xinyi -
Jie Xinyi, 27 years old during my fieldwork, is the founder and CEO of China-Africa Friendship Workshop. After initially leaving China to study his masters in the US, he lived and worked in several different parts of the world, including South America and other parts of Africa before founding China-Africa Friendship Workshop. While Jie Xinyi was extremely ambitious and driven when it came to his work, he was aloof when it came to interacting with locals. He was certainly less willing to interact with locals than most of the other Chinese I met, a fact that he was fairly upfront about and did not seem to consider something worth addressing in any significant way. He and I did not interact as much as I did with other members of China-Africa Friendship Workshop since he was often busy with administrative duties or meeting with Chinese entrepreneurs, but he was always upfront and sincere with his answers to my questions.

Hui Su -
Hui Su was 23 at the time of my fieldwork, and she was living and working at China-Africa Friendship Workshop as a part of an internship for her university studies in China. She was working on a video documentary about Chinese business owners and entrepreneurs living and working in Kenya. She and I often had conversations about each others’ findings and I occasionally accompanied her to her interviews. She often described herself to me as being a “non-typical Chinese girl”, which I took to mean that she was more outgoing and expressive than most Chinese women.

Lila -
Lila is the “house girl” at China-Africa Friendship Workshop. She was 23 at the time of my fieldwork, and she would cook and clean for those of us living in China-Africa Friendship Workshop. She identified as a Kikuyu and regularly attended Catholic mass on Sundays. Since she was our cook during weekdays, Lila was eager to learn new Chinese recipes and even tried to learn Mandarin to better improve her work in the apartment. Lila had a bright, friendly personality, and her commentary, particularly when my Chinese apartment mates were not around, provided thought-provoking contrast to the perspectives of many of my other Kenyan informants who did not interact with Chinese as much as she did on a regular basis.
Pritchard -

Pritchard is the driver for those living in China-Africa Friendship Workshop. He was in his early 30s at the time of my fieldwork, and lives with his wife and two children. In my own opinion, Pritchard was severely underpaid for his services to China-Africa Friendship Workshop, despite the long hours and reliable service he performed. Pritchard would often confide in me concerning his complaints about his employers at China-Africa Friendship Workshop, and on several occasions invited me to his home on the Eastern part of the city, which was primarily inhabited by Luo-speaking Kenyans. He had a calm and quiet demeanor, but was generally eager to answer my questions.

**Thematic Background**

China’s rapid growth in recent years is also accompanied by increasing competition within the labor market. According to my Chinese informants, job security in China is a rare luxury that few can claim to have, and internal competition for positions can be extremely cut-throat. As a result, many Chinese who pursue careers overseas bring with them a pragmatic mind-set/work-ethic that is characteristic of what many economists insist is the ideal behavior for working in today’s global capitalist market. I do not mean to imply that all Chinese embody this trait, but I found it was common among those I met in Kenya, and this may be because Chinese who pursue business opportunities overseas are doing so precisely because they are the ones who strive most fervently for economic success. Of course, this is not a uniquely “Chinese” trait; it can be clearly observed in the behavior of entrepreneurs the world over. In fact, a recent study found that Chinese and American businesses in Kenya have very similar business practices and even similar views of their Kenyan workers (Rounds and Huang, 2017). However, the language I often heard my Kenyan informants use to describe the Chinese in particular often painted them as greedy, asocial, and sometimes even malevolent. Westerners, on the other hand, were generally described as being more generous and socially flexible than Chinese, despite the fact that their behaviors in the business world are so similar. So, why do my Kenyan informants agree, almost unanimously, that these are traits that distinguish Chinese from their Western and African counterparts? Why are Chinese perceived as the new colonists, while Westerners have transcended the shadow of colonial oppression to a place where they are viewed as providers of wealth and development? This will be the central point of focus in this thesis.
White Saviors and Technopolitics

During the colonial era, European powers not only established their control over African populations through military oppression, but also through the use of technopolitics. In the case of British colonies, the construction of roads facilitated the maintenance of indirect rule over native peoples, which installed local headmen loyal to the colonial government as minor officials, through whom colonial administrators could enforce policies and control colonial subjects (Park, 2014; Larkin, 2008). Throughout the continent, European technologies such as radios, automotive vehicles, and various luxury goods inspired what Brian Larkin calls the “colonial sublime”: “the use of technology to represent an overwhelming sense of grandeur and awe in service of colonial power” (Larkin, 2008: 7). These physical and symbolic tools of governance played significant roles in establishing and reinforcing colonial power throughout the continent.

The most apparent Chinese contributions to Kenya’s economy have been the availability of low-cost Chinese products, such as cell phones and other electronics, as well as the funding and construction of several major railroads and highways across the country. China is not establishing a significant military presence (at least not in Kenya), but the injection of these new technologies and infrastructure projects may seem to some as reminiscent of the methods used in colonial times to inspire a sense of awe. In fact, some recent commentators on China’s overseas activities describe their approach as neocolonialist, but using “soft power” rather than the “hard” military power of past empires (Carmody, 2011; French, 2014). Lloyd Amoah (2016) suggests that the construction of buildings in African cities by Chinese firms is one means through which China is asserting its soft power and improving public relations through the raising of structures such as football fields or governmental facilities. Indeed, investments from China do not come without their own strings attached; in return for the funding and construction of infrastructure projects, China receives preferential access to many of the natural resources available in African nations, extremely profitable trade agreements, as well as political support in the international arena (Melber, 2017). In addition, as I will describe below, the practices of many Chinese actors are not ideal, and in fact can sometimes be quite reprehensible.

However, as is suggested by Rounds and Huang (2017), such practices seem to be the norm among foreign firms operating in Kenya. It is, I argue, because of China’s more recent entrance into African affairs on a large scale and the exhibition of what seems very similar to the
“colonial sublime” of the past that Chinese business practices are perceived to be particularly harsh in contrast to those of Western or African businesses. In other words, because Kenyans are less familiar with Chinese culture, they regard it with suspicion and mistrust when compared with Westerners, who tend to be more reflexive concerning notions of race and the colonial past. However, this also begs the question of why Westerners are so quick to paint Chinese activities in Africa as neocolonial and exploitative when in fact, as Henning Melber claims, they “might not change the rules of the game but simply join the hegemonic club” (2017: 2). What Melber points out here is that Chinese engagement in Africa, more often than not, does not change the structural inequalities present in African nations’ foreign relations, it merely adds a new power for African elites to bargain with. So, why is it that China continues to be portrayed as a neocolonial power while the West behaves in the same way without such stigmatization?

I suggest that notions of “white guilt” and “white savior” narratives are major contributors to this phenomenon. Since the post-colonial era, many Western states have struggled with how to reconcile the fact that their political and economic superiority in the international theater are a direct result of their colonizing entire continents. While this “white guilt” has spurred some of these nations to become active in foreign aid to formerly colonized states, it has also generated “white savior” narratives. The “white savior” figure is little better than the colonist of old, who believed it was his duty to “civilize” the natives of far-off lands. While the colonist was motivated by the desire to spread “civilization,” the “white savior” is driven by a desire to empower the poor Others, who would otherwise be unable to help themselves. Western media plays a major role in these narratives, publishing stories on the generosity and courage of white teenagers traveling to formerly colonized countries for a week to raise out of poverty the unfortunate people who cannot do so without the grace of such philanthropic youths. While such sentiments are certainly better than those of the colonial past, and some organizations do indeed do great work in the developing world, they often create aid-dependent economies and perpetuate the underlying issues that they hope to solve. Of course, this may very well be the intent of certain foreign powers; to ensure that formerly colonized nations remain dependent on the good grace of former colonizers. Perhaps the salience of narratives that portray Chinese as neocolonialists is due to the “white guilt” of Westerners, who have found a scapegoat for their own ill-gotten privilege; someone to point at and say, “Look, they are doing it too!” while they bask in their own self-righteousness.
The All-Encompassing Iron Cage

Another point to examine regarding China and its economic interests in Africa is why they resemble those of (neo)colonial Europe and the West as a whole. In Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), he introduces the concept of the *stahlhartes Gehäuse*. This phrase, if directly translated, comes out as something along the lines of “shell as hard as steel”, but its more well-known translation is the proverbial “iron cage”. The importance of this difference in meaning and imagery has been a topic of debate and has shaped how many interpret the passage of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Baehr, 2001). However, while a steel-like shell evokes the idea of modern man as a new kind of being as a result of the rationalism inherent in capitalist systems, the image of the “iron cage” has become more common in popular discourses on the ways neoliberalism, in a sense, “traps” human actors in modes of behavior that are, arguably, “inhuman”. In Marshall Sahlins’ *Folk Dialectics of Nature and Culture* (1976), he argues that the Western capitalist’s concept of *homo economicus* is not, as many modern economists insist, man in his natural state, but is in fact the result of historical events. According to Sahlins, this particular historical event is the advent of possessive individualism, “the unique notion … that men own their own bodies, the use of which they have both the freedom and necessity to sell to those who control their own capital” (Sahlins, 1976: 179). Those of us within the iron cage cannot help but play by these rules, and in today’s world, the cage has come to encompass all of us.

In recent years, China has become a major player within the global economy, due largely to its titanic manufacturing capabilities. While some may scoff at all things “Made in China” for their perceived poor quality, such goods are present in nearly any foreign market, and it is undeniable that China has become one of the most far-reaching manufacturing economies in the world. As a result of China’s economic growth over the past 50 years, Chinese businesses have accumulated the capital required to expand overseas, which not only means accessing new markets in which to sell products, but also accessing sources of the various raw materials needed to maintain the manufacturing of said products. Additionally, the Chinese government plays a major part in facilitating this overseas expansion, as many of the companies operating internationally are partially or completely state-owned. African nations not only contain vast “untapped” markets in the eyes of Chinese entrepreneurs, but also some of the largest deposits of
precious metals, fossil fuels, and other resources necessary for Chinese manufacturing. Thus, in order for Chinese economic interests to survive in the iron cage of global neoliberalism, they must play by its rules, which were largely established as a result of Europe’s colonization of Africa, Asia, and the Americas, and which continue to facilitate Western economic growth. In other words, if China wishes to compete with Western economic powers, they must beat them at their own game.

As noted above, the structural nature of African nations’ relationships with foreign entities has remained the same for hundreds of years, and China is no different. Natural resources from Africa are being exported to China, where they are converted to various manufactured goods, which often find their way back to African markets to be sold for a profit. Meanwhile, the main beneficiaries of these profits are the Chinese entrepreneurs and African elites who arrange for access to said resources, and the majority of Africans are left out of the equation, other than to provide cheap labor along the way. Within the framework of the iron cage, this is of course business as usual; these Chinese businesses are profit-seeking entities that must compete for survival in the global market. However, perhaps there is a difference between the Chinese case and that of Western powers. The products being exported from China back to Africa are significantly cheaper than those produced by European or American companies, and while many consumers may worry over their quality, products such as cell phones and other electronics are now available to poor populations that never had access to them in the past.

This increased capability for communication and access to information among Africans, and at lower prices than were possible before, could have significant effects in the near future. Increased awareness of global affairs, and perhaps even better education for marginalized populations could help to narrow the gap between the haves and have-nots. However, on the other hand it may merely make marginalized groups even more painfully aware of their disenfranchisement. One group of Kenyans who seem to be quite content with the influx of Chinese goods is electronics repairmen. Some repairmen claimed that there is a higher demand for electronics to be repaired because of the supposed poor quality of Chinese goods. While this may not necessarily be true, the necessary parts can be obtained for a lower price than those of European electronics. This, I believe, casts the concept of the colonial sublime in a new light. Whereas European goods have been viewed as signifiers of the height of power and success for
many years, Chinese products have enabled Kenyans to gain access to the same types of products, albeit with a lower prestige level attached to them.

The rest of this thesis will proceed as follows. The following chapter describes everyday interactions between my Chinese informants and Kenyans, which illustrates the general atmosphere and tensions felt by both Chinese and Kenyans and proposes some possible explanations as to why relations between Chinese and Kenyans are so strained. Chapter 2 discusses the significance of the roads being constructed by Chinese companies and what they symbolize to Kenyans in light of the colonial contexts of the older roads in the country, and also analyzes how these infrastructure projects fit into the framework of technopolitics. Chapter 3 analyzes notions of the colonial sublime in terms of Chinese manufactured goods being sold in Kenya, and how these products are perceived by Kenyans. Finally, Chapter 4 examines an emerging narrative among some of my Kenyan informants that claims Chinese are using occult means to achieve financial success in Africa. Within the context of existing witchcraft narratives in Kenya and elsewhere in Africa, this new discourse further illustrates the perceptions many Kenyans have of Chinese and allows us to examine notions of agency in Sino-Africa. In addition, this final chapter will serve as a frame within which to connect the earlier chapters into a holistic picture of Sino-Kenyan relations on a more personal level than is usually presented in other studies. The goal of this thesis is not to criticize Chinese behavior overseas or to frame Chinese ex-pats as a harmful presence in Kenya. Rather, it is intended to counter the dominant narrative that frames China as a neocolonial power, as well as to illustrate how living within a neoliberal economy forces us to behave in ways that prevent human connection and creates divides between communities that might otherwise cooperate in mutually beneficial relations.
Chapter 1

Sino-Kenyan Daily Interactions

“You should not hang out with those street people,” said Jie Xinyi, “they will try to rob you.” This came after Jie Xinyi had passed by Xavier and myself, not far from the apartment where Jie Xinyi and I lived. Jie Xinyi’s reaction to seeing me with Xavier did not come to me as a surprise - I found that such opinions are common among the Chinese immigrants living in Nairobi - but it troubled me that he would so brazenly shun this young man who had shown me nothing but kindness and became invaluable to my research, without ever meeting him. However, such sentiments were not exclusive to Jie Xinyi and other Chinese ex-pats. When I would ask my Kenyan informants about their thoughts on the Chinese presence in the country, their responses often began with the phrase, “They are bad people, they only come here to steal from us”.

During my time in the field, I found that my Kenyan and Chinese informants often held rather similar views of each other; feelings of distrust and suspicion seem to be widespread, and rumors abound from both sides. Many of the assumptions held by my informants seemed to focus on notions of cultural incompatibility or inherent racial traits rather than structural factors. Kenyans accused Chinese of being greedy and unfair businessmen who only come to Africa “to eat our money,” as several of my informants told me. Karsten Giese describes how Ghanaian employees of Chinese entrepreneurs often perceive their employers as having an “inhumane anti-family and anti-children mindset’, in combination with ‘sheer greed and selfishness’” (Giese, 2013: 8). Chinese, on the other hand, often told me they worried they would be robbed by locals or taken advantage of by police and other officials, and as a result they would usually avoid direct interactions with locals. While these perceptions seem to obviously be stereotypes, and I tried not to take them seriously, they are not completely unfounded. Kenyan officials do solicit bribes from Chinese, but this is not exclusive to Sino-Kenyan relations (see Rounds, 2016, for a more complete analysis on corruption and bribery between Chinese migrants and Kenyan officials), and Chinese businesses are notorious for underpaying their African employees. However, Rounds and Huang (2017) have shown that American businesses in Kenya often treat their local employees in similar ways to Chinese businesses, and yet, such negative stereotypes of Chinese continue to flourish, while Westerners are accepted as welcome guests.
Stereotypes

Many times, friends of those living in China-Africa Friendship Workshop who had recently moved to Kenya for a job at one of the growing number of Chinese firms operating in the country would come by the apartment, and we would take them out to help them get their bearings of the city and introduce them to new people. On one such occasion, Chang Bo asked me to take him and his friend, Lin, to a market to buy a hat. I brought them to the market stalls adjacent to Tumaini, and along the way, I asked Lin about her experience in Kenya so far, as well as her perceptions of the country before she had arrived. She told me that before leaving, she was told by friends and relatives that she should not talk with any locals, because they will all try to steal from her, and that her Chinese co-workers told her not to trust her Kenyan co-workers with important tasks, because they are unreliable and lazy. When I told her that this is not the case, her response was one of shock. She was even more surprised to learn that it is indeed safe to eat most food in Kenya without getting seriously ill. Unfortunately, such sentiments seem to be fairly widespread among the Chinese ex-pats I met. Katy Lam finds that Chinese entrepreneurs in Ghana also attribute such negative characteristics to their local employees and rarely trust them with important responsibilities (Lam, 2015: 25). During an interview with Ai Chun on another occasion, I asked her what sorts of cultural differences she has seen during her time in Kenya, to which she responded, “They would rather take pleasure and not work, but Chinese are very diligent and more efficient during work. You can’t say that Kenyans are lazy, but it’s more like they think sometimes pleasure in life is more important.” This was perhaps the most generous comment on Kenyan culture I heard from any Chinese in the field, and such sentiments often seem to be predetermined before they even arrive in the country, but some are cultivated afterwards.

On another occasion, I was having lunch with Hui Su to compare notes and share ideas of what we had found over recent weeks. I asked her about what she thought of the relationships between Chinese business owners and their local employees, because this is one of the few areas where interactions between Chinese and locals seem to occur to a significant degree. She told me that such relations are often strained, because Chinese bosses tend to suspect their local employees of stealing from the business, and that local workers are unreliable. This supposed unreliability was based on workers not showing up for work after being paid and difficulty learning new skills, characteristics that Hui Su, and I assume many of her interviewees, took to
be inherent African traits. Hui Su also told me that she and other Chinese ex-pats do not trust locals in general, and even fear being robbed at gunpoint if they go out alone. While such explicit fears did not seem to be shared universally among Chinese, I found that feelings of vulnerability were extremely common and contributed to further isolation of Chinese from locals.

These perceptions held by Chinese in Kenya often lead them to avoid extended contact with most locals, and as a result, Kenyans may form their own perceptions of Chinese. Many of my Kenyan informants would wonder why Chinese seem to purposefully ignore them, and without any Chinese voice to offer an alternative, Kenyans often come up with their own explanations, which generally assume that Chinese have something to hide and leads to suspicion on the parts of Kenyans.

One explanation I often heard from Chinese concerning their unwillingness to interact with locals was the language barrier. Lam claims that “The language barrier is the main cause of work tensions between the Chinese and their Ghanaian staff” (Lam, 2015: 28). Many of the Chinese living and working in Kenya, according to my informants, only stay for a few years on a construction project or a short-term contract with a firm and then return to China, and thus do not usually want to put in the time and effort to learn Kiswahili or improve their English. However, the majority of Chinese I met were young, university-educated, and many had studied abroad in English-speaking countries, and I found that their English skills were, if not fluent, at least functional. Even those with a firm grasp of English often cited this language barrier when I asked them about interactions with locals.

Communication between Chinese and Kenyans was not always easy though. I was once asked to accompany one Chinese girl to the hospital so that I could act as a sort of interpreter, even though I was translating English to English. I spent several frustrating hours repeating the questions of doctors and nurses to the sick girl, and then turning back and repeating the girl’s response. While it was a rather comic experience in hindsight, it became clear that despite the fact that both this Chinese girl and the medical professionals were all speaking English, I had to clarify certain things that were lost in translation or could not be understood by both parties, perhaps because of their unfamiliar accents. Such difficulties can certainly lead to frustration, both inside and outside the workplace, but it is hardly worthy of being a major cause for interpersonal tensions, and this cannot be the only obstacle for Sino-Kenyan relations.
Reciprocity

Kenya, in my experience, is a country where new friends and relations lie around every corner. People are extremely welcoming and hospitable; it would not be uncommon for someone you just met to invite you to their home for a meal. In this way, people form friendships, and any good friendship, regardless of where you are in the world, requires a bit of give and take. The initial show of hospitality implies a later reciprocation in kind, which will perpetuate and strengthen the relationship. In Kenya and other countries where economic resources are hard to come by for most of the population, many people may rely on building social support networks to obtain the things they need. However, many Chinese assume that these offerings of friendship are nothing more than attempts to extract material gains. As Chang Bo told me once toward the end of my fieldwork, “Chinese are more hospitable to outsiders, and won’t expect anything in return; Africans always ask for something in return”. I believe that Chang Bo’s statement indicates a difference in how reciprocation is expected, rather than if it is.

It seems highly unlikely that Chinese hospitality does not entail an implicit responsibility for the receiver to reciprocate in some way; as Marcel Mauss (1950) recognized many years ago, all gifts given, even if they are putatively given as “charity”, carry with them the obligation to return the favor at some point in the future, and to refuse or be unable to properly reciprocate creates a social failure on the part of the receiver, unless there are special social rules in place that account for such exceptions. Perhaps in China, a show of hospitality is reciprocated by less material gestures, such as an important introduction or some other favor, or perhaps reciprocation does not often take the form of “demand sharing” (Peterson, 1993), in which one party explicitly asks for a favor. However, material needs are often more pressing for many Kenyans, and such assistance with monetary or other material gifts may be more beneficial than promises of future favors. Below I describe several situations in which the reciprocity, or lack thereof, of Chinese and Kenyans does not seem to create mutually beneficial situations for both sides, and creates further tensions in everyday interactions.

In the above-mentioned instance when I brought Chang Bo and Lin to the small marketplace in Kibera, Lin was looking for a sun hat, since she and most of the other female Chinese I met were incredibly anxious about maintaining a pale complexion during their time in Africa. After a bit of searching, she found one that she liked, and the vendor began the game of price-negotiation, asking for 1500 shillings (approx. 15 USD). Lin then offered 400 shillings,
and I assumed this was merely her starting point from which the two would find a price somewhere in the middle of both offers, as is generally the case in these instances. However, as the vendor continued to lower his price, Lin did not budge from her 400 shillings. Several other vendors soon gathered to try and convince her to raise her offer, and some asked me to help, as I had met many of them in past weeks. It was not until a Danish ex-pat told Lin that 400 shillings is an unreasonable price, as these men were trying to support families, that she agreed to pay 500 shillings. I witnessed countless situations similar to this one, where Chinese would be unwilling to negotiate prices in the same manner as many Kenyans are used to, and my Kenyan informants often cited this unwillingness when describing the “greediness” of Chinese.

Such negotiations, or haggling, is an important aspect of not only shopping in Kenyan markets, but also of establishing social connections. Through haggling over the price of commodities, the vendor and the consumer are able to negotiate so that both are able to reach an agreeable price that is mutually beneficial depending on their respective means. For example, a consumer who is more well-off may be willing to pay a bit more for the commodity in question, and the vendor will ensure that the price is lower than what could be offered elsewhere, so that both can benefit from the purchase. In making this mutually beneficial deal, the two have started to create a relationship, so that the consumer may want to return for later purchases, or the vendor may bring the consumer to a friend’s shop for what he is looking for and help to negotiate a price. Such was often the case when I encountered vendors I had met before and they did not have the thing I was looking for.

These reciprocal relationships in the marketplace are unfamiliar to most in the Western world, where prices are nearly always pre-set (other than perhaps real estate or automobiles), but they can be important sources of social capital in non-Western societies. It can perhaps be equated with a modern version of “gifting” as described by Mauss (1950). Mauss proposes that the practice of gifting in pre-modern societies not only served as a means of exchange, but also of accumulating social capital and establishing one’s social status, as there is also the obligation of the receiver to reciprocate with their own gift some time in the future, and the value of the gifts given often determined the giver’s local power and status in the community. According to Mauss, modern exchange systems, such as the direct purchasing of commodities with currency or through bartering, do not allow for the more social aspects that gifting does. However, I would suggest that haggling in the marketplace does in fact offer a sort of revival of these social
aspects, albeit in a faster, slightly less ritualized manner. Both vendor and consumer want to benefit from the transaction, but they also want the other to benefit as well, so that they might continue to do business, or perhaps owe one another favors in the future.

Anthropological literature on exchange generally falls into one of two categories: structuralist and relational. The structuralist perspective places primacy on the structure and regular patterns of exchange, whereas the relational perspective focuses on “the way exchange creates relations between those involved in it, as well as between people and the objects exchanged” (Ferraro, 2004: 77). By making an asymmetrical exchange, it creates a credit/debt between the two parties concerned, which should ideally be reciprocated in the future, and thus binds the futures of the parties together (Peebles, 2010: 227). According to Ferraro, the notion of credit/debt that is commonly regarded as an exclusively economic category is in fact “a cultural construction that, in different parts of the world, is locally expressed in a diversity of socio-cultural practices” (Ferraro, 2004: 78). If an asymmetrical exchange is later repaid with an inversely asymmetrical exchange, it not only shows gratitude for the initial favor, but also opens the way for additional future favors. As is noted above, in much of Kenya, and many other non-Western societies, the creation of credit/debt is a means of forming and reinforcing social ties in unpredictable economic environments. However, because credit/debt is perceived and practiced in such diverse forms, this creates tension when Chinese customers and Kenyan vendors do not see eye to eye on how these exchanges should proceed.

When Chinese consumers refuse to negotiate in ways that Kenyans are familiar with, they are denying the possibility of forming a relationship with the vendors, who feel they are being taken advantage of by comparatively wealthy Chinese. Without reaching a price that is fair for both sides, Chinese consumers create a situation where they have benefited more than the Kenyan vendor, which according to Mauss and others, places the consumer in a position where they are obligated to reciprocate in some way in the future to benefit the vendor, but this never happens to my knowledge. Thus, Kenyan vendors are left to carry the loss of what could have potentially been a mutually beneficial transaction, while the Chinese consumer, who is generally perceived by Kenyans to be more wealthy and more capable of bearing that loss, has only improved his or her own material means. Similar instances are also common when Chinese employers negotiate wages with local workers, which will be discussed below. Such market interactions exacerbate Kenyan perceptions of Chinese as having an “inhumane anti-family and
anti-children mindset” (Giese, 2013: 8). In other words, this tendency for many Chinese to refuse to reach a fair deal in negotiations carries the implication that they do not care that many of these vendors have families or children to feed. The act of “overpaying” for goods carries with it the implication of higher status, and thus a certain degree of respect. So, when Chinese customers “underpay” for goods, they appear to be denying the capacity to help support those around them and receive less respect in the Kenyan community. Of course it is not really the case that Chinese do not care about the well-being of Kenyan vendors; it is more a matter that Chinese social cues for reciprocation do not match those of Kenyans, as well as the fact that business culture is incredibly competitive and high-stakes, so every opportunity to benefit from an exchange should be taken advantage of. Chinese who are only planning to stay in Kenya for a few years before moving back to China may also not see any benefit in forming such ties with locals. Thus, the iron cage forces us to seek material gains through whatever means necessary, and sometimes this means ignoring the possibility of forming social ties.

**In the Workplace**

Another arena where this lack of reciprocity seems to be apparent is in the labor market. While I was not able to obtain any first-hand ethnographic data on Chinese work environments for various reasons, many of the second-hand anecdotes I recorded seem to agree on some key points. Negative perceptions regarding Chinese were nearly always associated in some way with Chinese hiring or payment methods. Before digging too deeply into this topic, however, it may be prudent to bring up and examine some of the rumors going about regarding what are often considered “Chinese business practices”. All of the cases discussed below, regardless of their veracity, seem to be the result of an underlying xenophobia. Similar discourses sprout up around the world whenever a new group of foreigners enter a country in large numbers; in the US regarding Latin Americans, in most of Europe regarding migrants from the Middle East and North Africa, or countless other examples throughout history. Such narratives are certainly not unexpected, but they need to be examined carefully in order to tease out the role they play in different cultural contexts. The stories I heard most often generally concerned the following issues:

- Chinese construction companies send convicts to work on infrastructure projects in Africa
- Chinese construction firms only employ other Chinese for jobs that could be done by young Kenyans
• Chinese employers underpay their African employees, and rarely hire them with any sort of written contract

First of all, the notion that China ships prisoners overseas to do the manual labor on roads and other construction projects is patently untrue. Not only did I never see or hear any credible evidence of such practices while in the field, but the vast majority of unskilled labor on construction sites is done by locals. The issues of Chinese businesses only hiring Chinese employees and of the compensation of local employees are a bit more complicated. While the majority of workers on construction sites are Kenyans, one reason for the perception to the contrary is that very few of them are given formal contracts of employment, and thus are not listed in any official records. Full-time positions, on the other hand, are overwhelmingly held by Chinese nationals, often in specialist or managerial positions, such as engineers, site managers, or architects. While this is a controversial issue, it is justified by Chinese firms because it simply costs them less to employ Chinese specialists than to train locals (Olander and van Staden, 2016). Without being issued contracts for the work they do, many local workers are underpaid, and are unlikely to be protected by minimum wage laws. Most of these local laborers work on a day-to-day basis, and without any contracts, they often run into difficulties when they want to pursue legal actions.

In the workplace, many of the Kenyans I spoke with claim that not only do they not get paid as much as they normally would by a Kenyan employer who would understand the impoverished circumstances many youths live in, but that there are poor working conditions and they are not treated well by their Chinese employers. Chinese bosses have been described to me as “mean” and having yelled at their Kenyan workers when they do not understand something, which is again a consequence of the language barrier. Here we see another instance where there seems to be an imbalance in terms of reciprocity. The local workers feel they are not properly compensated or appreciated for the work they do, and this imbalance creates another gap in relations. Chinese employers are in a position of power, where they can afford to underpay their local employees due to the surplus work force, and Kenyans have no recourse to correct what they perceive as injustices. However, this is mainly the case in the construction industry, but the corporate world has its own complications.

While the majority of corporate level jobs in Chinese firms are indeed held by Chinese nationals, certain positions are usually held by locals when it comes to businesses operating in
Africa. More often than not, Chinese firms will hire local lawyers and accountants to grease the wheels when navigating the quagmire that is Kenyan tax codes and corporate law. In fact, one of the main services China-Africa Friendship Workshop provides to Chinese companies is to match up such workers with new businesses hoping to operate on the continent. However, my inquiries into this part of the organization led me to some rather unsavory conclusions.

One of Ai Chun’s main responsibilities at China-Africa Friendship Workshop was to match up potential local corporate workers with newly established Chinese businesses. She told me in an interview that one company specifically wanted local workers who are “not really smart, because they think smart people are more lazy”. At first, this seemed rather counter-intuitive to me; why should a large corporation want less intelligent employees when conducting business overseas? She explained the rationale as such: “they think smart people are more lazy, like they are just drinking coffee in the office, talking and chatting in the office, not working. And they are provided with very simple work, like inputting data and then print some financial documents, so they want a lady who is very reliable and diligent; detail oriented.” Perhaps something was lost in translation at this point; perhaps Ai Chun had meant someone who is charismatic or overly social. However, if we take this comment at face value, it seems as though the company in question is merely looking for local workers to complete the bureaucratic busy-work without asking questions or looking too deeply into the company’s affairs. In addition, by employing persons of “average” qualifications, the company can ensure from the start that this person does not rise through the ranks to superior positions. Preventing locals from upward mobility within the enterprise seems to be a common theme in many Chinese businesses. One Chinese scholar at a conference I attended in Nairobi stated that while Chinese construction firms may have local supervisors and managers on site, it is never the case that locals have Chinese working directly under them, even when such a circumstance would make sense within the company’s hierarchy. It is not entirely clear what the purpose or intention of this structural segregation is, but it is troubling that it seems to many of my Chinese informants to be taken for granted.

**Seeing and Being Seen**

A major development in Kenya, as well as many other parts of the world, has been the recent introduction of online transportation networks, such as Uber. Uber is a mobile phone application that allows users to order drivers, who are given GPS coordinates of the customer’s
point of departure and destination. The application also automatically calculates the fare for the ride, so that no negotiations are necessary. Uber and other similar services have become embroiled in numerous conflicts in many countries with traditional taxi services, since they offer lower fares and have severely decreased the demand for traditional taxis and other forms of transportation. As of 2016, Uber was employing over 1,000 drivers in Kenya, but this number has begun to level off as acceptance of new driver applications has been frozen. Many traditional taxi drivers would like to work for Uber, but the company has a series of requirements for the driver and the car’s specifications that many drivers are unable to comply with. In Nairobi, I found that ex-pats, and particularly Chinese ex-pats, would use Uber almost exclusively as a means of transportation around the city, and there are several reasons for this.

First of all, the economic benefits of lower fares makes it an obvious choice, as well as a more convenient transaction for those who are not familiar with the city or the norm of negotiating prices with taxi drivers. Secondly, customers do not need to go out to find cabs; the Uber driver will drive to wherever the customer has requested them. Thirdly, since all Uber drivers are registered in the company’s employees records, customers can be sure that their drivers will be safe and trustworthy, and can even submit reviews of their driver’s behavior. This last point is particularly important for individuals unfamiliar with the country, since according to Hui Su, the possibility of being robbed by locals is an ever-present anxiety.

Not only does this Chinese preference for using Uber cause anger among the large number of now underemployed taxi drivers, but it also limits the amount of personal interactions between Chinese and locals. One of Xavier’s friends once told me that no one ever sees any Chinese bosses, because they never come out of their homes or they avoid being seen. The use of services like Uber could certainly contribute to such notions. Chinese ex-pats limit their interactions with locals, whether intentionally or not, and Kenyans tend to wonder why the lives of Chinese seem to be so hidden, which can lead to all manner of rumors, including witchcraft discourses, which are discussed in Chapter 4.

The lack of visibility regarding Chinese ex-pats is also often contrasted with the more prevalent visibility of Westerners. According to several of my Chinese informants, Chinese culture does not facilitate the same kind of “openness” that one finds among Americans or Europeans who travel or live abroad. In the opinions of many of my informants, Westerners are

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2 https://qz.com/748149/drivers-in-kenya-are-protesting-against-being-uber-slaves/
more willing to try new things and meet new people than their Chinese counterparts, even if younger Chinese are more outgoing than older generations. Regardless of whether or not this is true, or if so, why it is the case, it is a sentiment that is shared among many Chinese and Kenyans. This perception leads many Kenyans to feel that Westerners are easier to deal with and create social ties with. However, it is also possible that Kenyans’ extended experience with Westerners as a result of colonialism has generated a sort of ingrained passivity; better the devil one knows than one that is unfamiliar. How can integration and cooperation, or at least acceptance occur if Chinese appear to be hiding themselves away from Kenyan society? Perhaps the reason for this isolation lies in the culturally variant strategies for living in today’s neoliberal world.

Within the iron cage, all of us are forced to make decisions that will allow us to prosper, or at least survive, in the global market. However, the logic behind our choices seems to vary depending on our cultural upbringing, despite the fact that we all inhabit the same cage. For Chinese living in Kenya, having grown up in an environment where workplace competition is extremely high-stakes, the most rational course of action is to focus on work above all else, as many of my Chinese informants told me, and accumulation of social capital is limited to more influential individuals who can provide an advantage in the Chinese business world. Kenyans, on the other hand, for most of whom higher education is not readily available and living wages are hard to come by, it makes more sense to spend time and energy accumulating social capital through various forms of informal reciprocity.
Chapter 2
The Semiotics of Roads and Mobility

Among my Kenyan informants, there is a common belief that Kenya is developing; growing into a “modern nation”. All around them, they see their city growing, both financially and physically in the form of newly built office and apartment buildings. This is in stark contrast to the acute disconnect felt by many Zambians living in the copperbelt, as described by Ferguson (1999). For some, this is a positive development, one which will bring them prosperity and upward mobility, while for others it signifies the process through which they and their neighbors will be displaced from their homes, and subsequently left behind and further disenfranchised. Perhaps most significant and symbolic of this process of development, and that most associated with China’s influence on the continent as a whole, is the construction of new roads and railways.

When asked whether or not the Chinese are improving life in Kenya, those that responded in the affirmative cited the myriad roads being built by Chinese companies. The ease with which these new infrastructure projects allow for mobility across the country cannot be denied. The roads that existed prior to those built — and being built — by Chinese construction firms can prove unreliable and provide slow, uncomfortable transportation for those who travel on them. As such, Kenyans who rely on being able to move quickly and efficiently around Kenya’s landscape view the work being done by companies, such as the China Roads and Bridges Company (CRBC), to be a major improvement for their livelihoods.

Historical Background

When examining the social impacts of these new manifestations of Kenya’s infrastructure, it is important to take into account the historical contexts in which they are placed. In some cases, the implications of these spatial reorganizations are rather ambiguous. In Northern Kenya, the region is undergoing a major transformation, as the construction of the Lamu Port-South Sudan-Ethiopia Transport Corridor (LAPSSET) is underway, largely as a result of Chinese financial assistance and planning. This Special Economic Zone (SEZ) will include both oil pipelines and highways that will connect Ethiopia, South Sudan, and the Northern region of Kenya to Lamu, on the Northern coast of Kenya, which is intended to become the largest shipping port in East Africa. It should be noted, however, that it is unclear at this time whether the entire project will reach its full completion as planned. In general, this project has been a
matter of great public debate, for ecological, legal, and a number of other reasons. The LAPSSET Corridor will also become a major factor in China’s extractive ventures, not just in Kenya, but all of East Africa. Hassan H. Kochore (2016), however, provides a more specific analysis of the social and political impacts of the LAPSSET Corridor in relation to the historical context of one section of the SEZ.

The Isiolo-Moyale road makes up a portion of the LAPSSET Corridor that, until recently, has seen little development and attention from the Kenyan government. Due to this lack of attention, both during colonial rule and most of post-independence, many inhabitants of this region “do not imagine themselves as being part of the nation owing to their social and political marginalization” (Kochore, 2016: 499). According to Kochore, the previous road in this region was often associated with opposition and challenge to the state’s authority during the secessionist war of the 1960s that was largely a result of the region’s aforementioned marginalization (Kochore, 2016: 502). However, the new road’s completion represents an attempt on the part of the Kenyan state “to naturalize and legitimize its power and authority by connecting the centre to the [Northern] regions and vice versa” (Kochore, 2016: 495). Such disparate associations create a complex dynamic between notions of development and power relations. The historical context of Kenya’s colonial past also creates ambiguous discourses on what development will mean for the rest of the country. Roads have symbolized a wide range of meanings over the country’s history: colonial oppression, resistance, upward mobility, unfulfilled expectations of modernity, etc. For this reason, it is important that we now examine how these meanings were shaped so as to understand the complex feelings Kenyans may experience now that a new foreign power is redrawing the lines of Kenya’s landscape.

During the early colonial period, British colonial administrations used the construction of roads as a means of control in order to manage the spatial movement of African subjects and to facilitate colonial rule in Kenya and other African colonies. British administrators in the Kenya colony ordered the construction of roads as a means of both enabling the efficient management of white-owned plantations and facilitating tax collection from rural Kenyan communities (Park, 2014). The roads were cut by those very same rural Kenyans, and their meagre wages went toward paying the infamous hut and pole taxes (see Mutemi, 2015: 3). Such policies particularly affected Kikuyus, the largest ethnic group in Kenya. Often, particularly for young Kikuyus, building and maintaining these roads meant being barred from social adulthood. According to
what John Lonsdale (1992) calls the Kikuyu “labour theory of value,” *wiathi*, or “moral agency” achieved through ‘self-mastery’” qualifies one to be considered an authority figure within the community (Park, 2014: 33). This “self-mastery” was generally reached by working the land, but due to the forced labor on roads ordered by the colonial state, many young Kikuyus remained precisely that: youths.

Over time, the roads allowed the possibility for those “youths” to seek social and economic elevation in urban centers, like Nairobi. However, this free movement frustrated colonial efforts in tax collection and other administrative tasks, and thus, in 1915 the colonial state enacted what is known as the *kipande* system. *Kipandes*, or registration certificates, were metal containers worn around the neck of all Africans within the colony, and contained the wearer’s identification and work history. These documents could be demanded by any colonial official, and allowed the state to monitor and restrict the movements of its African subjects. Africans found traveling without their *kipandes* were usually arrested and put to work on the roads, unless they could provide the necessary bribe to avoid hard labor (Park, 2014: 57). The *Kipande* system was eventually replaced by identification cards in 1950.

Just like the colonial roads built in Kenya, Nigeria’s road system was constructed by more or less forced labor under the direction of government commissioned local chiefs, and their introduction not only facilitated colonial administration, but also had significant effects on the social structure of Igbo society. According to Misty Bastian (1996: 3), the construction of these roads often obscured or destroyed the traditional market roads used by women, which effectively cut off kinship ties between villages and undermined the power and social capital of women. In more recent years, roads have come to represent liminal spaces that expose individuals to both mundane and magical harm.

In the post-war and early post-colonial periods, mobility through the use of cars and bicycles became a crucial opportunity for rural Kenyans who were prevented from achieving social maturity as a result of the restrictions placed upon them by colonial officials and local headmen. As such, roads and vehicles came to symbolize upward mobility, colonial resistance, and economic opportunity for disenfranchised Kenyans (Park, 2014). During the administration of Daniel arap Moi, Kenya’s second President, the country saw the semiotic meanings attributed to roads and means of mobility become more ambiguous, as roads fell into disrepair and became sites of danger for those who travelled on them.
Nowadays, many major roads outside of large cities, with some notable exceptions, have seen little attention over the years. They often alternate between stretches of packed earth and deteriorating asphalt, and are prone to being washed away or obstructed during the heavy rains that are characteristic of Kenya’s rainy season. On several occasions over the past year, traffic on the Nairobi-Mombassa Road has been at a standstill for over 12 hours straight due to weather conditions. Even in cases when traffic is not an issue, poorly maintained roads cause the long journeys outside of major cities to be both uncomfortable and dangerous.

Enter, China

The entrance of Chinese road building companies has seen a significant overhaul of Kenya’s roadways. Although still in its early stages, the infrastructure projects being conducted by companies like CRBC are already making an immense difference in the mobility of people and goods in Kenya. However, while the construction of new roads will likely improve the Kenyan economy and the mobility of Kenyans, many people harbor anxieties over what these roads will mean for Sino-Kenyan relations. Memories of the infrastructure projects built in the name of the British Empire may impact the opinions of older Kenyans, but I was unable to confirm this during my short time in the field. Younger Kenyans, however, worry about what they will “owe” to the Chinese after construction is complete. As one informant told me, “These Chinese, they build the roads for free, and then they will expect us to give them something in return. They will take our resources, and even then, we will still be in debt to them”. While it is not entirely true that the roads are being built “for free,” the intentions of Chinese businesses are suspect in the eyes of many Kenyans. They wonder what this foreign power is planning to do once Kenya’s infrastructure is eventually capable of generating larger amounts of capital, and whether they are heading toward a new colonial era under a people they are unfamiliar with and view with great suspicion.

Road networks in Kenya, as discussed above, have always provided those in power with a means for manipulating the organization of space, and “[f]or the majority of Kenyans[,]” Emma Park tells us, “there is nothing neutral about the organization of space” (Park, 2014: 6). The spatial organizations put into place by the British divided and categorized the social organization of Kenyans based on a Western understanding of the landscape. Once again, Kenya is being spatially reordered, but this time by a new foreign power, and it is yet to be seen exactly how this reordering will compare to those of old. The rest of this chapter will examine how
roads, as symbols, reinforce the neocolonial narrative that dominates Western media with respect to China, and how the construction of these new roads may come to reshape the symbolic meaning attributed to space and mobility in Kenyan ideo-scapes.

**Parallel Roads**

One evening in mid-March, I boarded the bus from Nairobi to Mombasa with Chang Bo. Chang Bo was on his way to Mombasa in order to look into the selection of hostels in Diani Bay, so that Jie Xinyi and other administrators at China-Africa Friendship Workshop could decide which they would send young Chinese students to when they came on cultural education trips. He had asked me to come along for company and as a sort of cultural translator, since many of my Chinese informants had difficulty deciphering the accents of Kenyans when they spoke English, and I had become more familiar with the country and language than he had. Needless to say, I did not need much convincing to accompany him on this excursion.

Having once before taken an over-night bus out of Nairobi, I expected little sleep due to the innumerable bumps and pot-holes that I knew would inevitably plague our journey. During the brief periods of reprieve when the jostling stopped long enough so that I no longer needed to pretend I was elsewhere, I would look out the bus window and see, running parallel to our own path, a new road being built. At the time, the raised, smoothly paved surface I saw only evoked feelings of longing as I wished our route could be but a score meters to the left. The powerful metaphor of these parallel roads may have been lost on me at the time, but as they say, hindsight is always 20/20. Two parallel roads, initially built nearly a century apart, one in the name of Empire, the other in the name of economic partnership, so close, yet never meeting.

The similarities between the roads being built by Chinese companies and those built under British rule certainly tempt one to draw the conclusion that China’s involvement in Africa and elsewhere are colonial in nature: the new roads follow many of the same routes as the old; Kenyan workers are paid very low wages for their labor on the roads; the goods that travel the roads are similar (imported building materials and manufactured goods, exported natural resources). However, such a conclusion easily obscures the differences that make these roads “parallel” and not identical.

While local workers on these roads are supposedly paid wages below the legal minimum wage (Deng, 2014; Ombuor, 2016), their participation in such projects is the result of economic forces rather than governmental coercion (although, as I describe in Chapter 4, some of my local
informants believe that road workers are coerced through magical means to accept low wages on these sites). Additionally, the new roads will not be used as a means of surveilling the movements of local populations and maintaining administrative control, as they were in colonial times (Park, 2014). However, it is unclear how the spatial expansion of these road systems will affect the accessibility, and thus, political/economic power of more remote regions.

The placement of these roads, as I discovered on another adventure with Chang Bo, will factor greatly into how certain areas are represented and funded by the state in future years. While hiking through the gorges outside of Hell’s Gate National Park, Chang Bo said to me that this must be “the most untouched place by humans” he had ever seen. Confused by this at first, I asked him, “But what about all the other tourists and hikers we have seen and the hiking trails?” He responded that the area’s purity lay, rather, in its lack of roads and other artificial structures. Roads as signifiers of development and growth, or in Chang Bo’s case, of human presence, seems to be a common view from both my Kenyan and Chinese informants. Such a conception of terra nullius, or untouched land, springs largely from European justifications for colonization, and tends to conflate different categories of human presence in the landscape (Beach, 2012: 45). These categories can range from the land having “never even been trodden by human feet;…” to “untouched in the sense that human presence is to compare with that of birds and bears, an impact which composes rather than opposes (or scars) nature” (Beach, 2012: 45). In the case of this instance with Chang Bo, the land had been inhabited by Maasai for generations. If land such as this is perceived as “untouched”, it carries with it the possibility of being “developed” to fit the needs and desires of those in power, which in this case are Kenyan elites and their foreign investors.

If we lay the construction of these two road systems side by side, as they are geographically, we see that the Chinese-built roads are erected for entirely economic ends, as opposed to the political and administrative agendas that accompanied the construction of colonial-era roads; colonial-era roads were primarily constructed to facilitate the movement of colonial administrators and the collection of taxes, especially in “low potential areas” like the Northern periphery. There was certainly an economic motive behind the colonial methods of administering Kenya, but Chinese-built roads will not retain the restrictions of movement that were attached to those built by the British. While the business methods of many Chinese companies operating abroad are far from fair and ethical, this is more the result of the globalizing
processes and neoliberal ideologies within which they operate than any Chinese scheme to “recolonize” Africa.

Dominant Discourses in the West

Given this contrast between Chinese and British-built roads, we must now ask ourselves why it is the similarities, rather than the differences between the two that reach the forefront of popular discourses, both in the West and in Africa. Journalistic media on China-Africa relations are more widely consumed by Western audiences than ethnographies are, and these media sources aim to increase their readership through claims that give a more black and white portrayal of complex situations, so it is easy to see how this neocolonial narrative achieves such acceptance among Western readers.

It seems that the economic aspects of colonialism are often more salient among Western audiences, and the violence and control of colonized peoples are portrayed as merely by-products of economic interest (Buxbaum, 2015). This, of course, misses the mark concerning the true brutality and inhumanity of the colonial period, which epitomizes the degree to which humans are capable of committing violence toward others. As Eric Olander states in an article responding to the question of whether China is recolonizing Africa:

It is intellectually dishonest to compare in any way 21st century globalized capitalism with imperialism that began in the 16th century…. To draw any comparison to the mind-wrenching violence of that era only minimizes the true horror that occurred under European colonial rule (Olander, 2016).

To be sure, the construction of infrastructures by Chinese companies creates a dynamic in which China appears to be the provider of development and the fount of technical knowledge, just as European powers were for centuries all over the continent. However, these technologies are no longer unfamiliar to Kenyans, and do not evoke the same awe and narratives of racial superiority that they once did. In fact, the reinvigoration of such infrastructures may very well lead to new unforeseen strategies on the parts of Kenyans to take control of and benefit from the technologies that once facilitated their oppression. As Brian Larkin observes regarding the rise of radio stations in Nigeria, “we see the mutability of technologies, their unruliness and capacity to create possibilities in excess of their expected use, as well as how these tensions between order and possibility, object and intention played out over time” (Larkin, 2008: 47). In other words, the improved mobility that these new roads facilitate may be beneficially taken advantage of by Kenyans in ways that have not been imagined by either China or the West.
People come and go, but I stay here

Perhaps the highest profile project currently underway by Chinese contractors is the Standard Gauge Railway, which is meant to replace the old narrow gauge railway between Nairobi and Mombasa, and will ultimately connect the Kenyan port city to Rwanda, South Sudan, Burundi, and Uganda. The railroad, as well as several other major projects, is being financed primarily by the Export-Import Banks of China, and is being built by CRBC. While the railroad’s completion is expected to significantly cut down on the travel time between major East African cities, the project has been fraught with controversy since its beginning.

The railway’s route passes through Nairobi National Park, one of Kenya’s largest wildlife sanctuaries. According to an article in The Guardian (2015), this route was chosen so as to avoid the necessary land seizures that would accompany its construction through populated areas. The stretch passing through the reserve will supposedly be walled off and raised in order to avoid disturbing the wildlife within the park. However, recent damage to stretches of the railway resulting from heavy rains have called into question the integrity of the work being done by CRBC (Mwangi, 2016). While it seems unlikely that the project will be abandoned, due to the immense economic importance it has for China-East African trade, some Kenyans worry that they will inherit their country’s debt to China without the possibility of economic growth that they were promised (Mwangi, 2016).

Here we see Chinese manipulations of space being associated with instability and impermanence. The structures and networks erected by Chinese companies are seen by many of my informants as no better than “counterfeit” Chinese cell phones (discussed further in Chapters 3 and 4). On several occasions, I heard informants say that they hope and believe the Chinese will soon leave Kenya after they have obtained what they came for: “They come here to eat our money, then they go back to China”. Such discourses are prevalent whenever outside groups come to do work and supposedly take work from locals, whether it is Latinos in the US or ethnic groups from the Kenyan interior on the Swahili coast. The “temporary” nature of China’s presence was also alluded to by Lila, the house-girl at our apartment. When commenting on the seemingly constant flux of Chinese residents in the apartment, Lila said to me rather lightheartedly, “People come and go, but I stay here”. What was likely meant as a playful remark, seems to cut to the core of how many Kenyans view the presence of Chinese migrants; the Chinese come to Africa and build enough to extract the resources they need, and then they
will leave and the roads and buildings they made will reveal themselves to be nothing more than false symbols of progress.

Here, again we see parallels with colonial era “modernization,” which introduced Africans to Western technologies and ideologies that, in many ways, disrupted pre-existing social orders, such as the forced road construction that deprived Kikuyus of achieving social maturity. Post-colonial Africans were then left to pick up the pieces of their chimeric nations, while any foreign aid came in the form of Cold War proxies, as the “First” and “Second” worlds fought over the “Third” (Carmody, 2011: 4). The end of the Cold War led to a shift in the West’s priorities regarding developing countries, and subsequently, the deployment of Structural Adjustment Plans (SAPs) promoted by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. SAPs “generally eliminated so-called ‘quantitative restrictions’ on imports, drastically reduced import tariffs, opened … economies to foreign investment and privatized many state-owned industries”, as well as slashed funding to much of the public sector, including education and health care (Carmody, 2011: 20). In much of the developing world, SAPs had crippling effects on the economies of these countries and the well-being of their citizens (Ferguson, 1999; Carmody, 2011; Smith, 2008). Given the way that Western nations have treated the continent over the past four centuries, it is understandable why many Africans worry over the seemingly ambivalent gaze of China.

The situation regarding China’s infrastructure projects in Kenya is nothing if not ambiguous. From the low wages and poor working conditions for Kenyan workers, to the nearly identical routes of new and old roads, it is not so farfetched for one to suggest that China is “recolonizing” the continent. However, as I have attempted to show, the business practices mobilized by many Chinese companies, while certainly leaving much to be desired, are a result of market forces and the neoliberal system; the “iron cage” in which both Chinese and Kenyans live. Conversely, the salience of narratives that portray China as a neocolonial power seem to do so by ignoring the violence and oppression of the colonial state. It is, of course, possible for a nation to colonize another through “soft power,” but in the case of China, African nations are faced with an alternative economic partner with a clear non-interventionist foreign policy, rather than the prospect of dealing with the caveats and restrictions imposed by Western partners.

China’s presence in Kenya will no doubt change the political, economic, and physical landscapes of the country. The tensions that have so far been felt as a result of an uncertain
future can be cooled if China follows through with the promises they have made to complete the projects that have been started. While it remains to be seen whether this will be the case, it will certainly affect how China and Kenya view each other and are viewed by others in the future.
Chapter 3
Chinese Counterfeits and the Colonial Sublime

In addition to China’s massive investment into Kenyan infrastructure, Chinese products have flooded Kenyan markets. Chinese cell phones and other electronics are extremely prominent, Chinese cars and auto-parts are beginning to dominate the roads, and even Chinese-made copies of “traditional” African crafts have been competing with those of local vendors in the souvenir markets throughout the country.³ While these goods are often easily accessible because of their low production-costs, the stigma associated with anything “Made in China” makes many Kenyans doubtful of their quality. Regardless of whether or not these products are in fact of poor quality, they are perceived as such, and this creates a unique dynamic in relation to the “colonial sublime” that has often been associated with “Western” products.

The colonial sublime was a powerful tool for colonial governments because their technological superiority was equated with moral and intellectual superiority. However, the flooding of African markets with Chinese manufactured products has, in a sense, turned the colonial sublime on its head. By making commodities such as cell phones, automobiles, and other prestige items more easily accessible, Chinese manufacturers have demystified these products that were previously symbols of power and prosperity. To own a cell phone is no longer an indicator of wealth or power, but has become a fairly common accessory in everyday life, both in Kenya and practically everywhere else in the world. While Western products do still carry more prestige and are frequently sought out because of their perceived higher quality compared to that of Chinese products, such tendencies will likely die out in the near future as Chinese products increase in quality and continue to fill the shelves of shop owners.

However, while cheap Chinese imports may have a relatively positive impact on consumer tendencies, they have a more complicated effect on Kenya’s economy. Retail businesses are able to buy and sell Chinese goods at much lower prices than both Western and domestic goods, which is beneficial for such businesses, but is taking a crippling toll on Kenyan manufacturing.⁴ Such developments in the manufacturing sector seem counter to the goals of Kenya’s Vision2030, which intend to increase the country’s industrial capabilities, reduce

³ Paul Stoller (2001) describes a similar instance of West African street vendors in New York City selling “traditional” African goods and clothing imported from Korea.
dependence on foreign powers, and diversify its economic portfolio. However, as Chinese imports continue to undermine domestic industries, Kenya’s economic growth does not appear to be making significant steps in this direction. During the colonial era, European powers limited access to education and other crucial resources as a means of controlling colonial populations and limiting their agency in global affairs. It is unclear whether or not it is a conscious move by Chinese elites to cripple local industries, or if it is merely the result of the almighty “invisible hand”, but if such trends continue, it is likely that the country will remain dependent on the service and tourism industries, and to a certain extent, agricultural exports.

While Chinese imports are detrimental to domestic manufacturing, other sectors are finding benefit in the availability of cheap products. Electricians and repairmen, for instance, are prospering as a result of the influx of these products. The replacement parts that otherwise would increase the cost of servicing such items are available for much cheaper prices, and thus, the cost of repairs is decreased, which is beneficial for both servicers and customers. While this scenario is not ideal - an economy in which products and infrastructure must constantly be replaced and repaired is neither sustainable, nor susceptible to significant growth - it does provide opportunities for a portion of the local population, which currently has a youth unemployment rate of over 22%.

While this rate is frankly much lower than in many other countries, both in Africa and around the globe, there is a common perception among my informants that it has risen as a direct result of incoming Chinese migrant workers and manufactured goods. The question remains then, whether or not the meagre increase in jobs and local capital will be enough to lead to more stable growth in the coming years, or if Kenya will remain dependent on the same industries it has in the past, which in turn will necessitate foreign investment and aid to remain afloat.

**New World Order**

Xavier would often say that we are living in a “new world order” in reference to various things. When I asked him what he meant by this, he said that “It’s all around us, it’s there but it’s not there. We see things growing around us, but we don’t get to have any of it.” What Xavier seems to be referring to here is a feeling common to marginalized groups’ experiences of modernity (Ferguson, 1999). The world in which Xavier and Connor live is one where they see their surroundings developing and growing in ways that resemble the economic centers of


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Western nations, but the developments are either unavailable to them, or those that they can access turn out to be hollow versions of what they expected would create new opportunities.

Connor often explained to me how difficult it was for him to find reliable replacement parts for his car, which is not only an important tool for his work doing electrical and plumbing repairs around the city, but is also a marker of prestige. He told me that when he needs replacement parts, mechanics will often try to sell him Chinese-made parts and claim that they are German, which are generally accepted as higher quality and more reliable. He would go to great lengths in order to find the parts he desired, and apparently it had become more and more difficult over recent years, since Chinese parts seem to have flooded the market and mechanics are more likely to stock up on the cheaper Chinese ones than the more expensive German parts. Of course, this is increasingly the case around the world as well, not just in Africa.

This same search for European products also seems to preoccupy many of my Kenyan informants when they are in the market for various commodities. However, it is not always easy to tell the difference between what they referred to as European “originals” and Chinese “counterfeits”. Whenever the subject came up, Xavier would invariably begin talking about the “CE” markings on many electronic devices, which he insisted was an indication that they are Chinese “counterfeits”. These markings actually have a rather complicated backstory; there are two symbols one may find on various manufactured goods that look nearly identical, but carry very different meanings. The first stands for “Conformité Européenne”, or “European Conformity”, indicating that “the product complies with the essential requirements of the relevant European health, safety and environmental protection legislation” for it it to be sold in European markets. However, a strikingly similar marking is also used by Chinese manufacturers to indicate that it is a “Chinese Export” and was indeed made in China. Thus, while Xavier’s assumption was not wholly incorrect, he continued to attribute either marking to being a “counterfeit”, even after I had told

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6 [http://www.ce-marking.org/what-is-ce-marking.html](http://www.ce-marking.org/what-is-ce-marking.html)
him about this distinction. He would often share his belief with others we spoke to, and from this perspective, it would appear that practically every imported commodity was made in China.

This distinction between “original” and “counterfeit” products in Xavier’s definition seems to refer to, or at least mirror the distinction between brand name products and their less well-marketed counterparts; what we may also call “off-brand” products. Sometimes when Xavier and I would walk through markets or malls together, he would explain how much better certain products are than the counterfeits; brands like Apple products and Beats headphones were particularly appealing to him. When I told him that many of these brand name products are themselves made in China, he explained that even within the category of Chinese products there is a distinction between the “originals” and “counterfeits”. This was puzzling to me considering his adamant insistence that all Chinese goods are counterfeits and that all counterfeits are therefore Chinese. The obsession with notions of authenticity and the various ways of discerning originals from counterfeits struck me as similar to discourses on the occult or the current debate in the US over what constitutes “real” and “fake” news, in which a comprehensive set of rules do not seem to exist, and interpretations may differ depending on the context or the desired outcome. According to Xavier and many of his friends, anything cheap or of poor quality is Chinese, and such products seemed to have eclipsed all others.

**All that is Solid Melts into Air**

The perceived poor quality of Chinese products also seems to have influenced the way that Kenyans see their own world. Connor once joked that Xavier is Chinese because he will likely fall apart in a few years. Xavier did not take very good care of himself; he often drank and smoked in large quantities, and generally lived a fairly unhealthy lifestyle because of his inability to find regular work. He would get sick often, and was very thin compared to Connor and many of their friends. The fact that his poor health was equated with the shorter longevity of Chinese products shows how such discourses on commodities can impact the ways that people perceive notions of longevity in other areas.

China’s putative monopoly of manufactured goods in Kenya made Xavier and Connor wary of nearly everything we came across in markets. Emotions surrounding the influx of available, yet unreliable products is reminiscent of the disappointment felt in much of post-colonial Africa. Ferguson (1999), for example, discusses the social consequences in Zambia’s copperbelt when people’s expectations did not match the realities of a modern world. For many
formerly colonized nations, independence promised the appropriation of the objects that had for so long been symbols of power and prosperity. However, these promises remained unfulfilled for decades, and the Chinese products that are increasingly available seem to many as a bitter-sweet consolation to these unrealized expectations. To borrow a phrase from Marx and Engels (1848), even the symbols of modernity that have come within reach seem to fall to pieces when grasped. In this context as well, we can see how the introduction of Chinese products have demystified the symbols of power that were once touted as evidence of colonial powers’ superiority; they have been revealed as empty of the inherent power they were formerly thought to possess.

However, in another sense they have further fetishized products manufactured in the West, as they are still seen as higher quality than their Chinese counterparts. In other words, the perceived poor quality of Chinese goods has confirmed the supposed superiority of Western industry. This may in turn explain the differing opinions of Chinese and Western intervention in African nations; Westerners are seen as more capable of providing the prophesied prosperity of modernity, while Chinese are seen as preventing such development by flooding the market with empty imitations of that same modernity.
Chapter 4
New Situations

I had never intended for witchcraft to be a topic of focus for my first fieldwork experience; since E.E. Evans-Pritchard’s analysis of witchcraft beliefs among the Azande of Southern Sudan (1937), the witchcraft trope has been written on gratuitously, and has perhaps reached a point of saturation in the academy. However, when Xavier mentioned to me that he and his friends protect themselves from magical attacks by smoking marijuana, I was surprised at first, but decided to press the topic.

“Witches only eat blood from people who have pure blood,” Xavier told me, “so they won’t attack us if we smoke and drink”. From there, I inquired about general information on how to recognize a potential witch, how they use their magic, or *juju* as many of my informants in Nairobi call it, and alternative ways of protecting myself from their attacks, all the while comparing his responses to the various literature on the subject I read during my undergraduate studies.

In an attempt to connect this discussion to my own work, I asked whether or not there are Chinese witches in Kenya. After briefly considering my question, Xavier responded with confidence, “Yes, but their *juju* is very different from African *juju*. It’s not as strong, but they do use it”. My interest had been piqued: why is Chinese magic less powerful? How widespread are these beliefs? How do these new discourses differ from more traditional ones? As I continued to question my Kenyan informants about their opinions of the Chinese presence in Africa, I would sometimes ask them about their beliefs regarding the occult. Some would also share theories of Chinese occult activities. Many of my Kenyan informants claimed that the Chinese who had come to Kenya to start businesses or work on the plethora of infrastructure projects being constructed do indeed use magic for personal gain, but I found that these beliefs are, for the most part, vague and not fully formed, and methods for countering said magic have not yet been developed. However, I propose that in the not so distant future, as Chinese populations throughout Africa continue to grow, rumors circulating throughout various African populations regarding Chinese occult activities will develop to the point that those holding these beliefs will

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8 *Juju*, witchcraft, and magic are used interchangeably throughout this paper. Etymologically, *juju*, or *joujou* originates from West African witchcraft discourses, which illustrates the global nature of such narratives.
feel the need to protect themselves with their own occult means. As Evans-Pritchard famously stated, “New situations demand new magic” (Evans-Pritchard, 1937: 513).

The material I gathered regarding Chinese use of magic is sparse, to say the least, and was only shared with me when I explicitly asked about the subject. This may be a result of the location where I conducted my field work. A large portion of literature on witchcraft has been written on the discourses present in rural areas, and my informants often explained that witchcraft is more common in the countryside. This may be because of the higher populations and more ambiguous kinship ties in urban areas, where one can find people from all different traditions and parts of the country. Perhaps because of this, many of the descriptions of the occult I encountered were inconsistent and sometimes contradictory. However, the common themes in the responses I did receive suggest that perhaps it is a growing belief among Kenyans, and should be examined more thoroughly in the coming years.

**Familiar notions of witchcraft**

Before delving into the social implications of these emerging beliefs on the future of China-Africa relations, it may be prudent to lay out the ways Kenyans describe more “familiar” occult practices. The aspects of numerous forms of African witchcraft have been, perhaps, exhaustively recorded, from some of the earliest analyses, like Evans-Pritchard’s work among the Azande (1937), to more recent applications of the trope in today’s digital age (Whitehead and Finnström, 2013). However, I suggest that the descriptions I collected in the field may shed light on the significance of this novel version of Chinese magic upon the rapidly changing social landscape in Kenya and around the world.

Oftentimes, when I would ask my informants whether or not they believe in witches, their immediate response would be along the lines of, “I am a Christian, I do not believe in these things, so it cannot affect me”. However, they would then go on to explain, in more or less detail, the dangers posed by such creatures and how to recognize one. Anyone who has spent time in the field where occult complexes flourish will likely have had similar experiences. It seems that there is a distinction to be made between “believing” in such discourses and “living” in them. While many of my informants may fear and actively avoid interacting with witches and recognize the power and accumulatory potentials of the occult, they would not admit to believing in them, because in believing, they in some way implicate themselves. To be involved in such forces not only poses a danger (physical, spiritual, financial) to oneself and one’s family, but also
invites the possibility — perhaps inevitability — of betraying and cutting social ties with kin and close relations, for as Peter Geschiere tells us citing a Maka proverb, “A witch has neither father nor mother, neither brother nor friend.” Once people take the *djambe* [witchcraft] road, they are ready to betray anyone” (Geschiere, 1997: 45-6). As such, informants would often be reluctant to reveal much about their knowledge of witchcraft, because to reveal a deep understanding of occult practices may imply to others that you have delved into such secrets, making you a potential danger to those around you.

As a result of the degree of secrecy surrounding most witchcraft discourses, it was sometimes difficult to get individual informants to expand on the subject, and I often had to get small bits of information from several sources. I found that a safe point of departure was to ask how one might protect oneself or avoid the notice of witches. In addition, while many witchcraft discourses in Africa and elsewhere follow some thematic similarities, they are also highly variant over space and time. However, Geschiere again provides us with a bit of wisdom on this front: “even if ideas are unstable and hardly systematic, certain principles can be discerned in local discourses about witchcraft and sorcery that have specific implications for [socio-]political processes” (Geschiere, 1997: 26). My Kenyan informants, hailing from a number of ethnic groups and traditions, did not always have identical descriptions, but overall, there are certain aspects that resembled each other and also those of literature on the subject.

When I asked my informants how to recognize a witch, they had similar answers for the most part: they are usually old men, who live alone and apart from the rest of the community, and on the surface seem friendly and generous, but they will eat their victims without remorse, given the chance. Xavier and I had several conversations on the subject, during which we discussed where witches are most prevalent, how they attack their victims, and how we might protect ourselves. Most witches, he told me, come from the coastal region, where they can access *majini*, spirit familiars derived from the *jinn* of Muslim cosmology, which aid the witches in their nefarious deeds. According to several of my informants, a witch cannot cause harm to an individual unless the victim willingly accepts the witch’s “aid”. Thus, those who seek out the help of an occult specialist can be considered quite desperate, since they put much at risk by making this “deal with the Devil”.

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9 Idioms of consumption, whether of flesh, goods, or money, are common within witchcraft narratives.
People may seek out occult solutions to their problems, whether to ease suffering or cause harm to others, from an *nganga* or *daktare wakenyeji* (“traditional doctor” in Kiswahili), magical specialists whose advertisements for love potions and financial success abound in Kenyan cities. They can also be sought out for protection from witches. Xavier told me about certain “microchips” that can be purchased to fend off magical attacks, but they must be regularly replaced as they lose their “charge” because once you begin to make use of these devices, they will leave the client vulnerable, almost like a magical withdrawal. While these “microchips” were never associated with Chinese magic, it could be interesting to relate them to the temporary nature of Chinese electronics in future research. However, one must use caution when seeking out these (most often) men, for the clients of a *daktare wakenyeji* may get more than they bargain for; by accepting the help of these modern-day witch doctors who could in fact be witches themselves, clients might repay with more than they gained. The side effects of these magical remedies can cause financial, mental, or physical damage not only to the client, but also to their friends and relatives, not to mention the client’s intended victim, and whatever is lost gets transferred to the original witch. Thus, misfortunes that are suspected of being caused by witchcraft can be understood as originating in instances of social imbalance or stress within a social group, such as feelings of greed or envy (Evans-Pritchard, 1937; Ferguson, 1999; Turner, 1970; Geschiere, 1997).

If these descriptions seem confusing and contradictory, that is because they are, and it is this aspect of witchcraft beliefs that make them so powerful. “Witches…[,] in the words of Jean and John Comaroff, “embody all of the contradictions of the experience of modernity itself, of its inescapable enticements, its self-consuming passions, its discriminatory tactics, its devastating social costs” (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1993: xxix). Peter Geschiere, in an article comparing African witchcraft discourses with Taiwanese spirit cults, explains that such beliefs involve “a staggering production of meaning, [which is] highly unsystematic and contradictory but, precisely because of this, extremely powerful” (Geschiere, 1998: 814). In other words, witchcraft discourses, with their “(over)saturated meaning” (Weller, 1994) and seemingly contradictory mechanisms, allow for issues relating to “modernity,” or “globalization,” or the “new world order” — take your pick — to be understood and dealt with in culturally salient ways that give a sense of control and balance to those living in a world that is in constant flux.
Here, we might examine how this aspect of the occult relates to larger geopolitics and socio-economics. The individual who seeks the aid of an occult specialist does so either because they are desperate, or they are hungry for the money and power that the use of magic entails. However, the “client” of an occult specialist, in seeking this power, creates a situation where they have been given something in return for very little. One young man told me that the “medicines” one can buy from waganga to begin their occult ventures are generally sold for extremely low prices: 3 or 5 shillings (always odd numbers, never even). If we look at this scenario through the lens of Mauss, there is now an obligation on the part of the client to reciprocate in turn, but such reciprocation is not easily satisfied, and is likely to consume not just what the client has gained since their foray into the occult, but also what they had before. This could be considered a microcosm for foreign aid in developing countries. When a nation, like Kenya, accepts aid from foreign powers, whether that be loans from the World Bank or IMF or China, or humanitarian aid from the UN, it creates a similar dynamic wherein the benefits of the aid, as well as Kenya’s resources are subsequently siphoned back to the providers of this putative “aid”. The nature of this siphoning varies depending on whether it is a multinational corporation like the World Bank or a sovereign nation like China, but the recipient nonetheless remains in the same structural position; the recipient still provides the means of growth and profit for the providers, while receiving little more than a brief glimpse of what could have been.

Non-magical “Witchcraft”

It is important to note that notions of witchcraft need not necessarily be limited to its magical forms. Witchcraft beliefs, and the plethora of local terms associated with them, vary widely throughout Africa, and yet Western observers, more often than not, tend to translate these various terms and beliefs as “witchcraft,” which we then place under the umbrella of superstitious beliefs in magic. However, in many cases, such terms in their local understandings may refer to more mundane activities done in secret, and which result in the harm of others for one’s own gain. Ferguson describes how jealous relatives may poison a victim’s food, an action that is considered “witchcraft” (Ferguson, 1999: 120). James Howard Smith similarly describes the forms of “witchcraft” that he examines in the Taita Hills of Kenya as “secretive

10 Ubwanga, in the local Bemba terminology, referring to acts that are done clandestinely, but not necessarily magically
11 Uchawi, in Kiswahili; BusaBili, in Kidabida
and destructive, and not necessarily magical, action[s] that threatened and resisted the (imagined) peaceful and productive sovereignty of the groups in question” (Smith, 2008: 16). With this in mind, it is important to take into account the “non-magical” forms in which Kenyans feel they are being targeted by the growing Chinese presence. These perceived threats aimed toward Kenyans by Chinese may provide insight into what has shaped the beliefs in Chinese occult practices, and how they might affect Chinese-Kenyan relations, both today and in the future.

Chinese imported “counterfeits”

As discussed above in Chapter 2, thousands of Kenyans are employed as day-laborers, and are often paid well below the legal minimum wage.\(^\text{12}\) In Chapter 3, I have described how a common complaint among Kenyan vendors of various products is that Chinese contact manufacturers back in China, where low-cost imitations of the goods are manufactured and then exported to Kenya, where they are sold at lower prices. Ishmael, a middle-aged Swahili man from Mombassa, described these imitations as “photocopies,” a term that illustrates quite clearly the role that such Chinese goods represent to Kenyans; they resemble the originals while not carrying the same value.

As discussed above, there is an overwhelming anxiety among Kenyans over whether the goods they purchased were authentic “originals,” or Chinese “counterfeits”. In their minds, anything produced in China or with Chinese materials is not “original” or authentic, and is therefore of inferior quality. While this may be so in some circumstances, it is certainly not universally true of all Chinese products. However, many of the Kenyans I spoke with believe it to be the case that such distinctions are of real significance, and have begun to develop a variety of methods for identifying such “counterfeits,” such as Xavier’s endless search for products lacking the ominous “CE” marking.

Along a similar vein, Xavier once told me, jokingly, that were I to have a child with a Chinese woman, that the child would fall apart because of its being Chinese, just as Connor said about Xavier. Likewise, several times I was told by Kenyan informants that, soon after Chinese construction began in earnest around the country, Chinese workers impregnated “all of the Kenyan women”. While I rarely saw any children of Sino-Kenyan parentage (some informants claimed that this was more common in rural areas where work crews constructing roads passed

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\(^{\text{12}}\) In Nairobi the minimum wage for unskilled labor in 2015 was about 100 KES/hr, roughly 1 USD (\text{http://www.africapay.org/kenya/home/salary/minimum-wages})
through villages), let alone any who seemed to be missing appendages, such narratives expose the anxieties felt by young Kenyan men concerning their own prospects of starting and supporting families in the future. Both of these anecdotes seem to point toward a Kenyan perspective on Chinese fertility/sexuality that parallels that of Chinese production; there is an anxiety that Chinese not only exploit Kenyan resources and people, but also that the end product is then of poor quality and/or inaccessible to Kenyans. These “counterfeits” not only threaten future growth and development in the eyes of young Kenyans, but also threaten their prospects of inheriting that same development. This commentary on Chinese (re)production, while certainly racially charged, also seems to point to the lack of reciprocity felt by Kenyans when interacting with Chinese (see Chapter 1).

**Secret meetings in the night**

Outside of Mombassa, I was told by British and Australian ex-pats, who were living and working at hostels in the area, of the clandestine activities of Chinese companies just off the coast. According to their accounts, Chinese construction firms were conducting off-shore dredging during the night, supposedly without proper permits, in order to obtain sand for the construction of new roads. This further increases the ambiguous perceptions Kenyans may have of the Chinese-built roads, which are developing the country’s peripheries at the expense of its wildlife. At night, one could see the lights of some sort of work being done on the horizon, and according to many of the locals with whom I spoke, the effects of this can be seen in its cosmetic impact to the beaches and the ecological health of local marine life. While some quick online research revealed that the dredging is, in fact, being done legally and with proper permission from authorities, the fact that it is being conducted at night raises many a brow among coastal inhabitants. Nighttime activity is generally regarded as suspicious, and is often associated with sorcery; witches are said to conduct their heinous rituals at night when they can avoid surveillance by others and even attack their victims in their sleep. The location of these activities (in the ocean) also points to occult practices, as *majini* are said to live in the ocean.

Rumors concerning Chinese nighttime activities are not restricted to the business world. On several occasions, informants expressed their disgust toward Chinese dietary habits, particularly the stereotypical Chinese appetite for dogs and cats. While none explicitly stated

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they had seen Chinese consuming dog or cat meat, many cited the supposed decrease of strays in recent years. According to these rumors, consumption of these animals have been conducted in secret or within the confines of isolated camps in the countryside at night, perhaps due to the taboo nature that many Kenyans, as well as Westerners, attribute to these animals as food. Dogs and cats are in many parts of the world taboo animals for consumption, and as such, the notion of eating them is often viewed as equally abhorrent as eating a human. This particularly strikes a chord among Kenyans, due to the fact that cannibalism, particularly that of kin, is a trait often associated with sorcery and the alleged occult practices of corrupt politicians (Blunt, 2004; Geschiere, 1997). Furthermore, the perceived exploitation of Kenya’s natural resources by Chinese interests, whether raw materials or its people, may be compared to consuming the nation itself. Just like the witches that consume their kin and close relations to increase their own power, China is seen as consuming Kenya’s substance in order to fuel its own economic growth.

The above mentioned threats experienced by Kenyans have significant economic and social impacts on the everyday lives of those affected. Given these effects, many Kenyans worry that while their country is developing around them, the people that seem to be benefitting most from this development are the recent Chinese immigrants, as well as the supposedly conspiring local elites who have been included in such discourses for some time. The following sections provide a brief description of the types of magic Kenyans believe Chinese are using in Kenya, and draws connections between these emerging beliefs and the more “mundane” experiences of Kenyans illustrated above.

**Chinese juju**

The types of magic supposedly used by Chinese differ in several ways from those more familiar to Kenyans. The end result is in some ways similar (i.e. money, resources, etc. being “eaten” by the practitioners of witchcraft), but the effects of Chinese juju seem to be more discreet and perhaps less permanent than other forms of witchcraft. While most of my informants were unable, or perhaps unwilling, to articulate the particulars of how these new forms of juju work, I was able to discover a few descriptions from my Kenyan informants of the ways Chinese witches attack their victims. When I asked my Chinese informants about their

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14 A recent incident involving rumors of Chinese companies importing and selling human meat as food to Zambia has further exacerbated these negative views of Chinese activity in Africa (http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/china-shipping-human-flesh-cans-8217761)
thoughts on the occult, their responses generally ranged from confusion to skeptical intrigue, but they rarely had anything to say on the matter.

From my conversations with Xavier, some Chinese will drop grains of rice into the open sewers that run through many of Kenya’s larger cities, and this attracts potential victims to the attacker’s place of business. In Mombassa, Ishmael told me that Chinese often use dolls, similar to the popular portrayal of “voodoo dolls,” to force victims to do their bidding. When I asked Xavier about this use of dolls, he confirmed that he had seen similar practices. It is possible that Ishmael’s and Xavier’s testimonies were misinterpretations of Chinese rituals involving offerings to ancestor shrines for luck and to respect familial ties, but this is just conjecture on my part. Towards the end of my time in the field, I had a long conversation with a friend of Xavier’s, Moses, on the topic of Chinese business practices in Kenya. He told me that Chinese businessmen, through some magical means, can “brainwash” Kenyans to accept unfair agreements, whether it be in the form of low wages on construction sites, or high prices on sold goods.

The first difference that stands out between these Chinese forms of *juju* and African variants is the way in which the occult practitioner obtains their desired goal. Using African *juju* allows the witch to acquire their desired outcome, be that their victim’s money, food, health, etc., directly through their occult means, which are inherently illicit. Chinese *juju*, on the other hand, places its victims into situations, such as commercial interactions or professional negotiations, in which they are magically coerced to agree to unfair terms. Therefore, practitioners of Chinese *juju* free themselves from accusations of illicit/occult business practices, since the deals made are reached in a supposedly free and open market. In addition, Chinese *juju* does not seem to carry the same negative side effects for its practitioners as other forms of magic.

Another major difference between these forms of witchcraft is the relationship between the attackers and their victims. Kenyan witchcraft generally requires significant degree of intimacy between the two, whether they are family members, neighbors, or friends. Ferguson explains that many Zambians living in the copperbelt feel anxiety about returning to their “home” villages for fear of being bewitched by relatives: “those who knew where your umbilical cord was buried were also those who had power over you” (Ferguson 1999: 117). On the other hand, some of the above mentioned forms of Chinese magic do not require that the occult practitioner and the victim even be acquainted with each other at all. However, this lack of
intimacy between victim and attacker is also present in witchcraft discourses relating to local elites (Blunt, 2004; Geschiere, 1997), which points to the power dynamic felt by Kenyans regarding Chinese immigrants. Since it is more than likely that a victim will not be closely acquainted with their attacker when it comes to Chinese forms of witchcraft, it is also virtually impossible to know who the attacker is, and thus, impossible to protect or purge oneself from its effects.

Not only is it nearly impossible to protect oneself from Chinese forms of witchcraft, but without knowing where an attack is originating from, it is impossible to place blame on a specific individual. Unlike many African witchcraft discourses, which often include divinatory means for determining who is attacking whom, and thus allow for amends to be made through some sort of ritual rebalancing of the social order (Evans-Pritchard, 1937; Turner, 1970; Geschiere, 1997), no such mechanism yet exists for identifying and combatting Chinese witchcraft. This aspect of discourses surrounding the “witchcraft of modernity” is fairly common; as victims of modernity’s instability are unable to identify who is benefitting from their suffering, so too are the victims of “modern witchcraft”. This is the result of the self-imposed isolation exhibited by most Chinese in Kenya; without forming interpersonal relations with each other, dialogues cannot develop so as to mitigate the rising tensions that are increasingly expressed in the idiom of witchcraft. This could very well become problematic in coming years, as “[r]umors about new forms of sorcery and witchcraft introduced by outsiders spread … like true epidemics and create panic since locals do not feel protected against such novelties” (Geschiere, 1997: 58).

**New Situations, New Magic**

It seems that there are some common themes among Kenyan beliefs in Chinese *juju* that differ from more traditional witchcraft beliefs. First, Chinese magic robs its victims of agency and/or freewill in order to place them in disadvantageous commercial situations. While this clearly resembles many African witchcraft narratives involving zombies, victims of Chinese *juju* seem to remain conscious and aware, but feel more of a compulsion to act in the attacker’s interest. Second, there is very little or no intimacy between victim and attacker. However, it is interesting to note that while Kenyan descriptions of Chinese occult activity seem unique when compared to more familiar witchcraft beliefs, the ways that Kenyans describe Chinese in their more quotidian behavior very closely resembles that of the classic witch figure. My informants’
descriptions of African witches often mirrored those in classic and more recent literature: asocial behavior, isolation from the rest of society, unaccountably wealthy, conducting their activities at night etc. Upon asking these same informants about their opinions of Chinese immigrants in Kenya, they often responded thus: “They are bad people;” “They always keep to themselves;” “They do not speak to us;” “These Chinese, they only come here to eat our money”. The parallels between these trait sets provides a starting point from which Kenyans begin to theorize on the providence of purported Chinese wealth and success within the Kenyan economy.

When Chinese businesses undercut local businesses and provide goods and services that are perceived by Kenyans to be of poor quality, many may wonder how such a business model can be sustainable, much less successful. It is, however, important to note that while many Kenyans perceive Chinese businesses to be prospering, they are in fact often struggling to stay afloat in Kenyan markets. Likewise, it seems strange to many of my informants, even despite the poverty and unemployment they experience, that their countrymen would accept the low wages offered by Chinese employers. One way that some Kenyans have begun to explain these quandaries is that people are being bewitched by the Chinese who seem to be unaccountably successful, particularly in light of the perceived behavioral similarities between Chinese and traditional witch figures. While this may seem naïve or childish to Western observers, witchcraft accusations often arise to reflect social-structural tensions, as well as the ways that neoliberalism is experienced in regions where it did not develop “organically” (Ferguson, 1999: 118).

Although neoliberalism has been a driving force in the Kenyan economy since the late colonial period, the Chinese entrance into Kenyan markets has brought with it what are perceived to be uniquely Chinese business practices, which Kenyans may be attempting to adapt to and cope with through these developing discourses.

As stated above, these assumptions about Chinese occult activity are not widely discussed or well-articulated. However, the shared themes between testimonies and their parallels with what are perceived as “Chinese” business practices suggests that perhaps in coming years these beliefs will spread and develop into a more defined discourse. If this is the case then it may have significant repercussions for Sino-Kenyan relations. Smith writes, “witchcraft beliefs always imply anti witchcraft actions, or attempts to control witchcraft” (Smith, 2008: 5). A shift in the collective imaginations of Kenyans toward beliefs of Chinese nationals using occult means to achieve material gains in Kenya may very well lead to attempts
to counteract the perceived threat. Such counter measures may manifest in mundane or occult forms, but neither would likely benefit Chinese or Kenyans, and the resulting tensions could be both economically and socially detrimental.
Conclusion

The key to the growth that Kenya and the rest of Africa needs is not going to come in the form of White saviors and the types of intervention the West has offered in the past and present. These have proven time and again to be just as ineffective as they were in the colonial era and have merely perpetuated many of the issues they supposedly aim to solve. Nor for that matter is China’s current engagement in the continent the solution, as the structural arrangement of wealth distribution seems to remain the way it has been for centuries. As it currently stands, average Kenyans are unable to benefit from much of the supposed development resulting from China’s presence. Rather, the beneficiaries of Chinese engagement continue to be foreign and local elites. This is not, however, the fault of individual Chinese actors coming to Kenya to make their own living. Both they and Kenyans are living within the iron cage and must play by its rules if they wish to find some kind of prosperity in today’s unpredictable neoliberal market. The real problem lies in the policies put in place by local elites that benefit themselves and outside actors rather than the masses, as well as the global system that allows the perpetuation of such policies to be viewed as fair.

In this thesis, I have attempted to show that China’s presence in Kenya, while reminiscent of colonial and post-colonial scenarios in the past, is different in significant ways. The manner in which Kenyans and Chinese interact in everyday situations, the symbolic significance of Chinese technologies in Kenyan infrastructure and markets, and the ways these relationships are manifested in popular discourse are a testament to the fact that this is a new situation, and it calls for new forms of analysis. China’s presence in Kenya resembles that of Western powers only if one does not dig deeper into its everyday realities.

Quotidian interactions between Chinese and Kenyans evidence stark cultural differences that will likely take time to bridge. These include degrees of willingness to interact in social settings, differing ideas of how to recognize and reciprocate gestures of friendship, and notions concerning work ethic and proper workplace behavior. Kenyans’ interactions with Westerners seem to be less strained, partly due to greater familiarity, and perhaps partly due to notions of “white guilt” on the part of Westerners. However, Chinese do not carry the burden of having oppressed Kenyans in the past, and this could potentially allow for future relations to blossom without the taint of a colonial past.
While technologies that Europe introduced to Kenya were for centuries symbols of unattainable social status, Chinese products have placed many of those same objects within reach of Kenyans. This reversal of the colonial sublime has, in a sense, leveled the playing field when it comes to outward shows of power, but it is uncertain how this will affect power dynamics in Kenya, where such exhibitions of status have strong historical roots. On the other hand, the improved mobility allowed by new road networks has the potential to greatly impact the lives of Kenyans, particularly because such mobility is not restricted in the ways it was in the colonial past.

These aspects of China’s engagement come together in the development of the witchcraft discourses discussed in Chapter 4. Such discourses serve as both an indicator that China’s presence in Kenya is strongly felt by locals, but also as a sign that the negative effects of Chinese engagement still remain somewhat benign compared to the Western influences that may have inspired some of the more violent themes in many other witchcraft discourses. In other words, the violence present in the witchcraft discourses we are more familiar with does not exist in this emergent discourse on Chinese juju because Kenyans recognize that Chinese actors are operating within the same iron cage as themselves, and their actions may not be motivated by oppressive or malicious intentions.

However, it is perhaps these differences that have resulted in narratives in which China is portrayed as an exploitative neocolonial power. Due to Kenyans’ unfamiliarity with Chinese culture, China may appear as a poor substitute for the modernity they were promised during the post-colonial movement, to the point that Kenyans may even think nostalgically of the days when the foreigners arriving on their shores had something of substance to offer, rather than cheap imitations. Yet, these notions of modernity are both historically constructed and highly variant in different times and places.

The pictures of modernity that people imagine range from visions of roads and skyscrapers in Kenya, to social welfare systems in parts of Europe, to fast and convenient access to consumer goods in the US, and everywhere in between. These conceptions of modernity are neither universal nor easily converted from one community to the other. It is also rare that the ways that people imagine modernity to look and the reality of how it is manifested match up. There is always a greater height to reach, even if one may imagine that their own world is the most modern relative to others.
I do not intend to propose that Chinese modernities are any less substantive than those of the West; that is neither the point of this thesis, nor is it true in any general sense, in my own experience. I also do not mean to imply that European colonization was anything other than the horrifying reality that it is rarely acknowledged to have been outside of the social sciences. The West’s treatment of Kenya, and Africa more generally, in the past has been truly atrocious, and China’s current engagement is, generally speaking, only a slight improvement. However, that being said, the differences that have been evident so far offer the possibility for a future that will allow the continent to develop in new and exciting ways, if Chinese and African actors are willing and able to seize the opportunities that are in reach. The most important development would be for Chinese actors to recognize the need for more reciprocal relations between themselves and Kenyans. While this suggestion certainly places the burden of reform upon the Chinese to improve relations, I found that currently, many of my Chinese informants were unwilling to make such strides, while Kenyans were more open to building new bridges. As it currently stands, the disparity of wealth, opportunities, and influence has created an environment of mutual suspicion, which does not mirror the official narratives of partnership that could potentially allow for growth and prosperity for all involved. While Mauss’ works on reciprocity and the benefits of gifting are rather outdated as social theory, they provide useful concepts with which to approach more mutually beneficial relations, both between nations and individuals. Such a model does not necessarily need to limit China’s ability to grow economically; stable and self-sufficient African nations will also benefit their partners.

Chinese interests overseas are not, as I have tried to illustrate, an attempt to replicate Europe’s past expansions, nor are the practices of Chinese actors the result of some inherently “Chinese” character. What we are observing presently is the effort of a vast and growing nation, with its own painful history of colonial oppression, to obtain a position of stability in an unpredictable and unstable economic system that it neither created nor asked to be a part of. All of us are living within the global iron cage, and to point to others and call foul while the rest of the world behaves exactly the same is both hypocritical and unfair. My hope is that this thesis has not only illustrated some of the flaws in contemporary neoliberalism, but also presented scenarios that could, with a bit of effort, lead to cooperation and growth.
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