

Miriam Driessen, *Tales of Hope, Tastes of Bitterness: Chinese Road Builders in Ethiopia*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2019; viii +198 pp. with notes, references, and index: 9789888528042, US\$45.00 (hbk)

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*Tales of Hope, Tastes of Bitterness: Chinese Road Builders in Ethiopia* is a compelling ethnographical research of Chinese road builders in Ethiopia, who straddle parallel worlds, literally and figuratively. As Miriam Driessen puts it, they are as it were, suspended between China and Africa, between the luring promises of an overseas job and the frustrations of a slow accumulation of insufficient wealth to enjoy the China Dream, and between self-perceptions of saviourhood and realities of powerlessness. In doing this, Driessen provides an insightful perspective of China–Ethiopia relations as experienced by ordinary Ethiopians and Chinese road builders. The book therefore unsettles the dominant narrative of an ‘all-perfect’ and well-choreographed Chinese presence in Africa. It reflects the sinews, complexities, and cracks among Chinese workers in Africa and the societal, ethnic, and wealth inequalities between the Chinese, which too often go untold.

Composed of nine chapters, the book traces how ‘tastes of hope’ transition into ‘tastes of bitterness’ among Chinese road builders. In her Introduction, Driessen highlights prejudices that underlie Chinese–Ethiopian interactions in road constructions. Chinese perceptions of indolent and ungrateful Ethiopians unaware of their underdevelopment is matched by Ethiopian perceptions of the ‘colonial’ Chinese insensitive to local customs, laws, and way of doing. The second chapter explains how Chinese workers regard working in Ethiopia as ‘an investment for the future’, a mission to develop the underdeveloped Ethiopia and an alternative pathway to climbing the social ladder that is otherwise unattainable for non-skilled and semi-skilled labourers in China. These push and pull factors inform why hope soon turns into bitterness, as years pass and promises of riches are unmet.

How to maintain their Chineseness and remain untainted by their local hosts is the focus of the third chapter. This is then followed by ‘Politics of intimacy’, a chapter which explores intimate relations between the Chinese workers and Ethiopian women.

The next chapter shows how perceptions that Ethiopians are unable to operate in a modern workplace, justify Chinese managers and supervisors’ efforts to mould Ethiopian labourers into model workers, able to attain a Chinese standard of productivity. Chinese managers regard Ethiopian labourers’ resistance to this ‘moulding’ as uncooperative and indolent behaviour, which they believe is the bedrock of underdevelopment in Ethiopia. In turn, as put by Driessen in the sixth chapter, this inspires indiscipline among Ethiopian labours who, reckoning that the law and local courts are on their side, creatively resist Chinese overtures. The result is lawsuits (Chapter 7) and speaking bitterness (Chapter 8) as Chinese labourers realize that their missional ambitions and personal ambitions for wealth and to be ‘somebody’ are unattainable and that they are tethered to Africa – unable to raise enough money to leave Ethiopia and live the China Dream in China. In addition, the lawsuits have led to the rise of entrepreneurial Ethiopians that mediate relations between the Chinese companies, the courts, and local employees – exploiting conflicts between Chinese companies and local workers for profit. Skilfully, Driessen concludes by reflecting on China–Ethiopia historical relations showing how Ethiopia exercises agency, and the Chinese, while aware of their country’s growing global status, are too busy to focus on politics – reflecting the chasm between state-to-state relations and people-to-people relations between China and Ethiopia.

In a subtle manner, the book highlights the saviour mentality of Chinese road builders who regard themselves as heroes on a mission to save Ethiopia from underdevelopment and poverty. Particularly interesting is how these Chinese workers, mostly from precarious urban or rural backgrounds, subject Ethiopians to the discrimination they themselves face from their fellow Chinese. In that respect, they re-enact the power and social hierarchies imposed on them. In China, they were nobody, in Ethiopia they are somebody.

Driessen then sheds doubt on claims that Chinese workers transfer knowledge to local Ethiopian labours because the superiority of the Chinese workers over Ethiopians is based on possession of knowledge that the Ethiopians do not have. Knowledge therefore becomes a tool to maintain distance between the superior and the inferior, teacher and student, and Chinese and Ethiopian.

In focusing on everyday relations between Chinese road workers and their Ethiopian labourers, and how they both exercise agency to achieve their often parallel objectives, forced to merge at some point by their respective states, this book makes an important contribution to research on China–Africa relations. Straddling anthropology and international relations, the book reflects the complications of merging state objectives with ordinary people’s objectives, which ordinary people are at times unwittingly burdened with in bringing their country’s objectives to fruition. The nexus of state and people’s objectives is what has been missing in China–Africa studies specifically and in international relations broadly. The book’s contribution is in pointing this out as an area for further research. In sum, *Tales of Hope, Tastes of Bitterness* challenges the ambivalence and abstractness of narratives of China–Africa relations. It is therefore valuable reading for anthropology and international relations students and scholars interested in China–Africa relations.