# Project Assemblages: Identity Realignment in China-Africa encounters in the Construction Industry in Congo-Brazzaville

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## Abstract

Many studies on China-Africa encounters have demonstrated the significance of ethnic and racial identities in these encounters. I reverse this perspective and ask: in what circumstances are China-Africa encounters shaped by identities other than racial and ethnic ones? Drawing on my ethnographic research in the construction industry in Congo-Brazzaville, I argue that the actions of many Chinese are often more influenced by their economic roles, such as workers, managers, and entrepreneurs than by their ethnic identity. Their identities are thus realigned in the economic encounters which I term "project assemblages." This concept highlights the fluidity of multiple identities in economic encounters and shows that China-Africa encounters are a fertile ground for producing theories, beyond the China-Africa framework, on lived experiences of economic relationships.

## Résumé

De nombreuses études sur les rencontres sino-africaines ont démontré l'importance des identités ethniques et raciales dans ces rencontres. Je propose de questionner cette perspective et pose la question suivante : dans quelles circonstances les rencontres sino-africaines sont-elles façonnées par des identités autres que raciales et ethniques ? En m'appuyant sur mes recherches ethnographiques dans l'industrie de la construction au Congo-Brazzaville, je soutiens que les actions de nombreux Chinois sont souvent plus influencées par leurs rôles économiques, en tant qu'ouvriers, gestionnaires et entrepreneurs, que par leur identité ethnique. Leurs identités sont donc réalignées dans les rencontres économiques que j'appelle « assemblages de projets ». Ce concept met en évidence la fluidité des identités multiples dans les rencontres économiques et montre

que les rencontres sino-africaines sont un terrain fertile pour produire des théories, au-delà du cadre sino-africain, sur les expériences vécues des relations économiques.

## Resumo

Muitos estudos têm demonstrado a importância que as identidades étnicas e raciais desempenham nos encontros entre a China e África. No presente artigo, inverte-se essa perspetiva para questionar: em que circunstâncias os encontros entre a China e África são moldados por outras identidades que não as raciais e étnicas? Com base na investigação etnográfica que realizou no setor da construção no Congo-Brazzaville, o autor defende que as ações de muitos chineses são com frequência mais influenciadas pelos papéis económicos que desempenham, enquanto trabalhadores, gestores, administradores e empreendedores, do que pela sua identidade étnica. As suas identidades são assim realinhadas nos encontros económicos a que o autor chama "project assemblages" ("montagem de projetos"). Este conceito coloca em destaque a fluidez das múltiplas identidades presentes nos encontros económicos e revela que os encontros entre a China e África são um terreno fértil para gerar teorias, para além do quadro China-Áfica, sobre as experiências das relações económicas vividas.

> *Laoxiang jian laoxiang, beihou fang yi qiang.* (A popular twist of a Chinese saying, meaning that when two people from the same hometown meet elsewhere, chances are that some backstabbing will occur between them.)

Both trade and migration between China and Africa have a long history (Siu and McGovern 2017; Li 2000; Monson 2009). Since 2000, Africa-China connections gained new momentum and has been growing rapidly (Driessen 2016; French 2014; Michel and Beuret 2009). Many studies on Africa-China connections have demonstrated the centrality of such racial and ethnic identities as "Chinese" or "African" for people involved in such connections. Some of these studies directly address the issue of racialization in Africa-China encounters (Huynh and Yoon 2019), whereas some others implicitly take the division between China (Chinese) and Africa (Africans) as a framework and examine, in various situations, how the two groups are tied closer or further divided. At the same time, many scholars have pointed out that "China" in China-Africa encounters is not a monolithic group but an assortment of elements with widely different rationales of action. Then, several crucial questions can be asked: If the growing presence of Chinese elements in Africa does not form a coherent "Chinese" force, how can we characterize the group of Chinese elements in Africa? How should we understand the identities of Chinese in their encounters with Africa?

Scholars have developed different approaches to answer these questions. One is to compare Chinese elements in Africa with global capitalism and examine if Chinese elements act in a similar capitalist logic. Yan and Sautman (2017, 7) see China in Africa as part of global neoliberalism and stress that China is wrongly singled out in media and research articles. Other scholars try to tease out the particularities of China in Africa. Lee (2017), for instance, contrasts China's state

capital with private global capital in the Zambian mining sector and shows that the former differs from private capital in its pursuit of long-term and more broadly defined benefits. Importantly, she contrasted Chinese construction corporations with those in the mining industry, arguing that the former act differently from state-owned mining companies but more similarly to private capital from China or elsewhere (Lee 2017, 54). While Yan and Sautman's and Lee's approach is powerful in breaking away from the geographical and racial framework of China and Africa by bringing in global capitalism and teasing out Chinese capital's specificity in it, this approach implicitly equalizes China with capital and Africa with labor and/or resources. It thus leaves out an important group of people without much possession of or control over capital in China-Africa encounters: Chinese workers.[1] Flattening China-Africa encounters in the construction industry as simply mediated by the logic of private capital over-looks the fact that it is here that many, if not most, Chinese workers work and interact with their African coworkers (for a recent statistics of Chinese workers in Africa, please see China Africa Research Initiative 2024). Moreover, equalizing Chinese elements with one or multiple forms of capital does not reveal the connections and tensions between various sorts of Chinese agents of capital, such as managers and entrepreneurs. Thus, this approach falls short of interpreting the multiplicity of the experiences of individual Chinese in living and working in Africa or elsewhere.

Some other scholars approached the multiplicity of experiences of Chinese in Africa by bringing in more nuanced ethnic and racial categories. For example, Xiao and Liu (2021) propose the concept of "discursive ethnicity" to highlight that the Chineseness among Chinese in Nigeria is not an essential category but discursively constructed, which has multiple and changing manifestations among different groups of Chinese there. They show how people from Hong Kong or Fujian distinguish themselves from other Chinese in Africa. In a more literary tradition, Yoon (2023) analyzes the felt tensions and uneasiness of being a mixed-race Chinese in a fiction by Henri Lopès, an influential francophone African writer. While this approach has the merit of a more dynamic and nuanced understanding of the geographical, cultural, and racial complexity of Chinese experiences in Africa, it is still limited within a geographical and racial framework of Africa-China. Sticking to such framework has the risk of under-estimating how other factors shape people's identities and their socialities. In other words, a crucial question is left unaddressed: apart from their identities like Chinese or other more ethnically or geographically precise categories, are there any other identity categories that can effectively influence the logics of daily actions of Chinese in Africa?

This article suggests that the rationale for many actions of Chinese in Africa is that they are workers, employees, entrepreneurs, or other identities than geographical or racial ones. By geographical identities, I mean identities based on one's geographical hometown and specific cultures related to it, such as dialects and customs. For overseas Chinese, some common examples, with different levels of precision, include Chinese, Fujianese, Wenzhou people, Cantonese, and so on. By racial identities, I refer to identities derived from one's phenotypical appearances and assumed hereditary characteristics. Some

examples include Chinese workers calling their African coworkers *xiaohei* (little black) and Congolese people yelling *Chinois* ("Chinese" in French) to people who look like one. By ethnic identities, I refer to identities related to cultural and social characteristics rather than hereditary and phenotypical ones. In this article, "Chinese" can be racial, ethnic, or geographical, depending on different contexts. Some scholars already noticed the "dilution of 'Chineseness'" of Chinese infrastructure projects in Africa as they get involved in local societies (Goodfellow and Huang, 2020). Others argue that "race" and "racism" need to be understood in relation to "continual processes of meaning/myth-making" (Castillo 2020, 330; Huynh and Park 2019, 168; cf. Yoon 2023, 158). Indeed, in the ethnography below, we will see Chinese workers, while calling their African co-workers *xiaohei*, develop very intimate relationships with them by sharing food, chatting about family and sexual lives, and roughhousing. Therefore, I will argue that to better examine the experiences of Chinese in Africa, one has to, paradoxically, decenter such geographical, ethnic, and racial categories as Chineseness or Africanness and investigate how other identities, especially those based on economic relationships, shape people's actions.[2]

To illustrate this point, I draw on my ethnographic research from 2016 to 2021 among many Chinese actors in the construction industry in Congo-Brazzaville. The construction industry is among the most important realms of Chinese activities in Africa. The amount of infrastructure financing in Africa from China was much higher than that from other major economies in the world in the 2010s (Sun, Jayaram, and Kassiri 2017). In many large African cities, there are some landmark buildings or infrastructures financed or contracted by Chinese firms: the Nairobi-Mombasa Railway; light rail systems in Lagos and Addis Ababa; the Kintélé Stadium Complex in Brazzaville; the Gnassingbé Eyadéma Airport in Lomé; and so on. Indeed, a recent news item indicated that Chinese companies are winning "the lion's share" of the construction market in Africa (Nyabiage 2023). I will show that these construction projects give rise to project assemblages—that is, a connected network of a wide range of individuals, materials, and organizations that are drawn together by a project. While they generally work well with each other, sometimes new sources of friction (Tsing 2005) also emerge between the elements in these assemblages. The new friction, not necessarily between Chinese and African elements, shows that the usually taken-for-granted dividing line between China and Africa in the studies of China-Africa encounters is inadequate to capture the fluidity and multiplicity of identities in such assemblages. I suggest that the concept of project assemblages is a useful tool for understanding the dynamics of project-driven encounters between ethnically and culturally different groups because it does not take the ethnic or cultural differences between these groups as the starting point of the research. Rather, it highlights how different situations, especially those conditioned by economic activities in contemporary capitalism, give rise to qualitatively different tensions. By addressing such questions, this concept seeks to draw a field where the working of global capitalism realigns the identities of different actors in myriad ways so that their activities can't be solely interpreted in ethnic or geographical terms.

## Assemblage and China-Africa studies

To capture the multiplicity and fluidity of connections and tensions within encounters of multiple groups with different cultural backgrounds, I draw on the concept of "assemblage." It was first introduced into literary critique by Deleuze and Guattari (1980, 10), who use it (*agencement* in French) to refer to a multiplicity, such as a book, which at the same time tends to form a totality by itself with fixed meanings and changes its meanings when juxtaposed with other assemblages. Since then, this concept has been widely used to characterize and analyze different social configurations (Sassen 2008; Collier and Ong 2005; Kloos 2017). While Deleuze and Guattari used the concept highly analytically to refer to a specific structure of meaning that can be attributed to different entities, other authors use it more descriptively to refer to an assortment of complex elements with different logics of action in concrete social and political settings. Stephan Kloos defines it as "a kind of intermediate, experimental matrix of heterogeneous elements that gather in a particular place" (2017, 699). It is territorial and open-ended but not enduring. Similarly, here I define the concept of project assemblage as the heterogeneous, contingent elements (people, things, organizations, etc.) that come together to complete large-scale projects in construction or other industries. Some of the typical elements in construction assemblages include a large, often international, construction firm with the necessary qualifications to bid for large-scale projects; subcontracted firms that provide technicians and laborers who actually do the construction work; and construction service firms that provide transportation, customs clearance, travel arrangements, and other services to the projects. But unlike Kloos's analytical use of "assemblage," which highlights the "bigger picture" of the whole pharmaceutical industry of Tibetan medicine (2017, 699) or other authors' emphasis on the general complexity of the elements in such assemblages, I use it to specifically stress the possibility of realigning identities of the people involved in assemblages. By realigning, I mean the process of certain identities becoming more important than others to shape people's experiences, attitudes, and actions. In China-Africa encounters, which this paper deals with in particular, the concept highlights the importance of asking what boundaries emerge in the interactions between these elements and in what circumstances. It does not assume that the issues of China-Africa are the predominant concern for everyone involved in China-Africa encounters. This standpoint thus contextualizes such encounters with other concerns and specifies the conditions where the latter becomes more significant than the boundary between the Chinese and Africans.

Up to now, the connection between China and Africa has already been examined from various perspectives, including geopolitics and international relationship (Mohan and Lampert 2013; Mbabia 2012), aid (Brautigam 1998, 2009, 2015), development (Sautman and Yan 2007, Bokilo 2012), African people's impression of the China-Africa relationship (Sautman and Yan 2010a, 2010b), anti-Chinese mood (Hess and Aidoo 2015), racial discourse in the interaction between Chinese and African people (Sautman and Yan 2016), capital-labor relationship (Lee 2009, 2014), media cooperation (Ran 2015), and so forth. The construction industry, however, has fallen outside the scope of many studies

until most recently (e.g., Wethal 2017; Wolf 2017; Driessen 2019). Wethal's paper looks at several construction sites of Chinese projects in Mozambique; she argues that the Chinese and African workers are spatially and hierarchically divided in these sites and that this division is apt to generate resentment between the two groups of workers. However, this paper seems to take the category of "Chinese workers" and "African workers" for granted and fails to notice the inner divisions of these two broad groups. In addition, how divisions between Chinese and African workers are negotiated and crossed in everyday practice remains insufficiently explored.

Some scholars on China-Africa have noticed the enormous internal diversity *among* Chinese in Africa, and there is often friction among them. One case where such frictions often take place is between contractors and subcontractors. In her study of Chinese road builders in Ethiopia, Driessen has well documented the wide differences between the employees of Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and those of private enterprises in many aspects: their living conditions, payment, and intensity of work (Driessen 2019, 48–60). But her description doesn't take these differences as a fundamental characteristic of global Chinese construction projects, nor does it explain how these differences result in tensions among Chinese.

Building on these studies, my ethnography will show that such divisions among Chinese employees are widespread and multifaceted. Such divisions exist between workers, workers and managers, managers and their supervisors, subcontractors and contractors, and many other groups. For business owners, cutthroat competition between Chinese entrepreneurs in the same trade can be so grave that they can use local police or mafia forces to intimidate one another. Despite the mediation of Chinese commerce chambers, distrust among Chinese entrepreneurs in Africa is common.

The ethnographic data are collected between 2017 and 2022. I spent roughly twenty days in total on one construction site, observing the work and leisure activities of Chinese and African workers and their interactions. This site was chosen because it was among the few whose construction work was not interrupted by the economic crises going on during my early fieldwork in 2017 and 2018. These core observational data are strengthened by brief visits to two other construction sites in Brazzaville. I also formally and informally interviewed around thirty-seven relevant people, including twelve Chinese workers, fifteen Chinese entrepreneurs and managers, and ten African (not necessarily Congolese) workers. Except for three female Chinese entrepreneurs, all of the others are men. Based on these ethnographic data, this paper examines the assemblage from two aspects: the site of construction, where the workers, engineers, supervisors, and other relevant personnel carry out the work of building; and relevant groups of people working outside the sites, who provide services for and make deals about construction projects. The daily routines and life trajectories of the members of the two parts are distinct, but both of them show, in different ways, how a variety of identities come into play to shape Chinese experiences in Africa.

Although the concept of "project assemblages" is theoretically applicable to other groups of people involved in various encounters (Faier and Rofel 2014) driven by large-scale business projects, this research is mostly based on the

experiences of Chinese rather than those of Africans. One reason is that I was able to access more diverse Chinese groups than African ones in the construction industry. But more importantly, on the African continent, it is the Chinese who are the migrating side in China-Africa connections. Their experiences tend to be simplified and the multiplicity of their identities overlooked. Thus, showing how their identities are realigned by debts, (sub)contracts, and employment bears relevance to other migrating groups around the world.

## History of Chinese presence in Africa and Congo

The above reasoning, however, must be historically contextualized, as the backgrounds and experiences of Chinese in Africa have always been changing. While the earliest documented Chinese migrants in Africa can be dated back to the seventeenth century, major waves of migration from China to Africa didn't start until the second half of the nineteenth century, which were driven by the contemporary turmoil in China (Li 2019). These early Chinese migrants in Africa were mostly traders and artisans with little connection with the Chinese imperial state. They lived mostly in Southern Africa and African islands in the Indian Ocean. Despite the small number of migrants (several tens of thousands), in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the division among Chinese migrants in Africa was mainly between Cantonese and Hakka people. They spoke mutually unintelligible languages, and they had their own associations and schools. If there was a general association for all Chinese migrants, there must be some mechanisms to balance the power of these two groups. At that time, the division among Chinese was mostly between different geographical and cultural backgrounds.

Apart from free migrants who came to become traders or artisans, another major group of Chinese migrants during the colonial period was laborers for large construction projects or mines. This is the case of Congo, which was part of French Equatorial Africa when the first major group of Chinese laborers came. They were recruited by the French colonial government to build the Congo-Ocean Railway in 1929. But this group didn't stay long to establish a migrant group. Most of them died there or returned to China after a few months (Sautter 1967).

The components of Chinese migrants in Africa shifted significantly in the 1960s and 1970s when many African countries gained independence and the vying for influence during the Cold War was most heated. During this period, traders and merchants were replaced by engineers, managers, doctors, and others with specialized skills who came to Africa for aid projects. Among these projects, the most prominent was the TAZARA railway, which mobilized thirty to fifty thousand Chinese workers and engineers to Tanzania and Zambia (Monson 2009). These Chinese were highly conscious of their Chinese identity, as the significance of this project lay not in making profits but in demonstrating the brotherly solidarity between China and its African counterparts by sharing modernity and the ethics of hard-working (Monson 2009). In Congo, this period saw an ideological affinity with China and its Maoism (Yoon 2023, 177). Many aid projects were funded by China, including a textile factory in Kintsoundi in

Brazzaville, the Parliament Building, a major stadium, and a hydroelectric station, among others (Clark and Decalo 2012, 94, 172). Like their predecessors coming for the Congo-Ocean Railway, most of the personnel coming from China for these projects didn't stay but came back to China after the projects were completed. Nevertheless, these projects might have left important, yet diverse and fluid symbolic meanings for Congolese people's understanding of their connections with China (Yoon 2023, 188).

Since the 1980s, especially after 2000, the number and diversity of Chinese migrants coming to Congo have increased significantly. This trend has been driven by many new Chinese policies that promote Chinese enterprises' out-bound development and investment, especially in Africa. The earliest of these policies can be dated back to 1979 (Li 2019, 86), while the better-known ones, such as the "Going Out," the Forum of China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), and the Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI), formally came into being many years later. How these and other Chinese policies have mobilized more Chinese of different back-grounds in Africa is well documented elsewhere.[3] It suffices to emphasize that the wave of Chinese migrants coming to Africa exceeds the previous ones not only in number but also in diversity. Employees of Chinese SOEs or Chinese-owned private enterprises, entrepreneurs and their families, medical aid corps, volunteers in the Confucius Institute, and many others have come to Congo. Although very few have migrated to Congo for good, Chinese migrants as a group are becoming stable in Congo to such an extent that Julien Bokilo, a Congolese scholar, argues that China has a strategy of "rooting" (*enracinement*) in Congolese society (Bokilo 2012). It is the dynamics of this stage of the China-Africa encounter that the concept of "project assemblage" tries to grasp.

## Project assemblage on the construction site: Hierarchical realignment of identity

Like many large cities undergoing rapid development, Brazzaville has a landscape strewn with construction sites and unfinished buildings. Many of them were initiated in the years of high oil prices, around 2010 to 2015. In 2017, due to the shock of low oil prices, only a few of them were active. Project B was among the active ones. The owner of the building was a large China-Congo joint venture, and the building would serve as the office for this company. The principal contractor was a large Chinese state-owned company that has projects worldwide and has completed many important construction projects in Congo. The area of the construction work was the size of three standard soccer fields, surrounded by a wall of dark green undulated iron sheets. At the time of the fieldwork, the concrete structure of the building was already finished, and the main ongoing task was to install the systems of water, electricity, and ventilation. Back then, there were about 100 Chinese workers and 250 African workers on the site.

The daily routines of these workers reflect the economic and spatial division between them. The Chinese workers have their dormitories and canteens on the construction site. For most of them, the dormitory room is shared among six people. Some privileged workers live only with two other workers. They get up

around 5:30 in the morning and arrive at the workplace before 6:10. At the same time, the African workers come to the site from their own homes, some of whom are from Kinshasa. They come in clean and fashionable clothes, and their working clothes are deposited at the site, usually ragged and stained by dust, lime, and oil paint. After changing their clothes, they start to work with their Chinese "*chefs.*" In this project, one Chinese worker usually works with one or two African workers, a Chinese-African ratio much higher than other China-funded projects in Congo, which are around one to five or even one to ten. They work at least ten hours a day, with a mid-day break from 11:30 to 13:00. Around 11:20, the workers leave their work sites and head for lunch. The Chinese ones go to the dormitory to get their utensils before going to the windows of the canteen to get lunch. Most of them take the lunch back to their dormitory and have it with their roommates. After lunch, they take a nap for about one hour. At the same time, the African workers leave the construction site. They have to buy their lunch at a temporary canteen facing the backdoor of the site across the road. This is not a special setting; canteens spontaneously set up by local women are found around many large construction sites in Brazzaville. The one next to Project B is particularly well equipped: it has an iron-sheet roof provided by the contractor, with several large tables and long wooden benches. The food is prepared on-site by local women with temporary stoves made of bricks and fueled by dry wood and paper. Simple as it is, the canteen is very popular; around noon, it becomes a place for the local workers to chat and socialize. After lunch, they would rest in the canteen or the shade of several trees nearby, sitting or lying on the ground. Together with their Chinese colleagues, they return to their working spots around 13:00. Formally, the work in the afternoon ends at 18:00, but 17:40 is the real time to stop working. Chinese workers return bulky tools to the zones for stock, and local workers change back to their clean clothes. The most joyful time of this site is perhaps around 18:00. African workers leave the site in groups in their clean clothes, some with a headset as posh as their clothes. The Chinese workers go outside the site to do some shopping: a Chinese vendor, who owns and runs a small supermarket in Brazzaville, goes to the backdoor of this site every two days, selling fruits, snacks, liquor, and some other necessities to the Chinese workers. Apples and fried peanuts are the most popular goods. The dormitory is also the place for dinner, but compared with the tiring silence among the workers during lunch, the atmosphere during dinner is much more relaxing. In the dormitory I am most familiar with, the younger workers sit together and watch popular TV series using their phones, and the elder ones either eat by themselves or go to other dormitories to have a small gathering with their *laoxiang*, people coming from the same city or province in China. After dinner, some workers would go to the office zone for the managers and engineers of the project, where there is free WiFi. They use this connection to contact their families and friends back in China or other places of the world, play online games, or simply skim contents in various social apps. This is also the time for washing clothes and taking showers. After 21:00, the entire site falls back into silence; most workers go to bed at this time.

The workers do not have weekends; they work almost every day except for major Chinese and Congolese holidays. African workers have more control over

the rhythm of work than their Chinese peers. Their wages are paid twice each month. The next one or two days after the payday, the number of African workers on the site is only about half of that on other workdays.

In their daily routine, as described above, Chinese and African workers are clearly divided in many aspects. Yet they are closely linked as well, not only in the sense that they have to cooperate to get the work done but also that they are creating a common ground to understand and even bond with each other. Where the most significant division lies, the language, is also where the most salient linkage is built. To my knowledge, none of the Chinese workers in Project B speaks French, let alone any local languages; similarly, none of the local workers speaks Chinese. However, the two groups of workers use a very basic pidgin, which nevertheless has stable pronunciation for words to communicate. This pidgin only has words; it cannot produce sentences except single-word imperative ones. The pronunciation of these words comes from French or Lingala. For example, one of the most frequently used words is *yaka*, which means "come." The word comes from the Lingala verb *koya*, meaning "to come." One of the patterns of using these pidgin words is to repeat the word once. So in practice, the word *yaka* is used as *yaka yaka*, and similar usages include *miso miso* (look, from the Lingala word *miso*, meaning an eye), *gala gala* (big, from the French word *grand*), *joli joli* (good, pretty, well done, from French word *joli*), and so on. These pidgin words are widely used between Chinese and local workers, at least in Congo. Apart from being used across different construction sites, even Chinese cooks of the Chinese contractors in Brazzaville use these expressions when they make purchases in local markets.

Intriguingly, the glossary of this pidgin is not limited to the words directly related to work. It also contains those related to personal lives: *madamu* (woman), *bébé* (baby, child), and *yesu* (to die). *Madamu* is often used to refer to the girlfriend or wife of local workers. This word, often appearing together with *bébé*, appears when a local worker talks with his Chinese fellow about his plans after work or the next payday. Sometimes, the workers use it in a sexual sense in chatting and joking. When they say in the Moungali area there are many "*madamu joli joli*," they mean that there are many prostitutes.[4] On Chinese construction sites in Brazzaville, I have never seen any female workers. In such a gendered environment, for the Chinese and African workers, when they want to share anything unrelated to work, women and sex are likely to be among the first topics. *Yesu* is a more somber word. I heard it used once while visiting the construction site in the afternoon. One Chinese worker told me that one local worker fell from a high place on the construction site next to Project B. Then he asked his African coworker to see if this person died: "*Ami là-bas yesu la*?"[5] The African worker nodded. The wide use of these words unrelated to work reflects significant communication between Chinese and African workers on non-work topics. Indeed, many Chinese workers have told me about the families of their local coworkers: where they live, how many siblings they have, if they have girlfriends or children, and so on. The tone in which they told me about these details seemed to convey a message that life was not easy for these Africans. Apparently, this pidgin language is expressive enough to convey such subtle messages, and Chinese and African workers spend time sharing such experiences.

Chinese workers acted accordingly: some regularly took extra food from their canteen and gave it to their African coworkers. They also lend money to them when the latter are in need. Their interactions reflect a certain level of bonding and intimacy as well. Sometimes they playfully punch each other or huddle together. These bodily contacts appear indispensable for communication when the pidgin fall short of expressing more subtle feelings or sentiments.

These interactions, whether verbal, material, or bodily, which are well documented in other ethnographic studies of Chinese-African worker interactions (Driessen 2019, 2020; Haruyama 2022), all show that despite various divisions, Chinese workers and African workers can find a way to cooperate efficiently enough to complete work and communicate subtly enough to establish a certain level of friendly bonding.[6] Contrary to the view that the institutional and spatial division necessarily leads to resentment and confrontation, the Chinese and African workers here in this project, though perhaps unconsciously, have transcended the divisions in a spontaneous and mutually acceptable way so that the project can be done as required and the process is less painful for both sides. This is not to say that there is no division or resentment between Chinese and African workers or that such divisions are justifiable; rather, it is to reveal how certain connections or even solidarity are still possible because of their shared worker identity. This is why the concept of project assemblage is useful: it draws our attention from the taken-for-granted cleavages to the dynamics of emerging bonds.

The perspective of assemblage not only shows that existing cleavages can be overcome to a certain extent but also exposes some unexpected fissures in the categories usually seen as homogeneous. The Chinese workers in Project B, for example, are not monolithic because of the complex system of subcontracting. The contractor of this project is Corporation C, but none of its employees work on-site. Its subsidiary, Company E, is in charge of carrying out the work. Yet it only provides part of the managers, engineers, and interpreters on the site. The subsidiary of Company E, Company F, provides a proportion of the workers on the site. Two other companies, without any direct link with Corporation C, are the employers of the other workers. So the workers are divided into two groups: those under contract with Company F and those under contract with the other two companies. The first group of workers is called *ziyingdui*, the corps of workers having a direct relationship with the contractor; the second is called *waibaodui*, the corps of workers from subcontract companies. Because of the close relationship between *ziyingdui* and the contractor, they have many privileges compared to workers in the *waibaodui*. For example, *ziyingdui*'s dormitories have only three people in one room, and it has its own canteen other than the large canteen for all the workers. On the site, *ziyingdui* workers are usually assigned less arduous tasks, such as running the lift, keeping security at the gates, and so on. These divisions between *ziyingdui* and *waibaodui*, though they are both Chinese, are no less irritating for the *waibaodui* workers than their friction with African workers. One afternoon, one of the *waibaodui* workers I was familiar with told me indignantly: "I don't mind they have some perks, but the requirements on the site are applied to only us but not them! This is bullying." He was talking about the requirements for the behavior of workers, which are nominally applicable to all the workers of this project. His words clearly reflect the discontent of one

group of Chinese workers towards another. This division within the group of Chinese workers in Africa shows that this group is far from homogeneous. This same worker also told me about his experiences of a more serious case in Algeria, where the disputes over payment between the *ziyingdui* and *waibaodui* in a Chinese construction project escalated into a strike of the former. Obviously, the "Chinese" is an inadequate category in the study of China-Africa connections, at least when international capitalism is in question.

In addition to the different employment relationships with different levels of subcontractors, they are also grouped by technical specializations and their hometowns. During the evenings, workers from the same hometown or proximate ones often get together to play poker or other games, while those without many hometown fellows spend the evenings on their phones. Some workers form a working group on a specialized task led by an experienced senior worker. It is not uncommon that these groups conflict with one another during work, often caused by insufficient coordination.

Such cleavages among Chinese workers not only show the heterogeneity of the group of workers from the same place but, more importantly, reveal the limitation of the effectiveness of ethnic or geographical perspective in China-Africa encounters. The dynamics of the assemblages are constantly fitting in some places and fissuring in others. This, in turn, shows the strength of this concept in exposing the nuances in seemingly homogeneous groups.

On the construction site of Project B, except for the engineering supervisors, who were employed by a local firm, Africans were mostly short-term workers. In general, these African workers interacted more often with their Chinese peer workers. Despite occasional quarrels or even fighting, they got along with each other. By contrast, in their relatively fewer interactions with Chinese managers, there tended to be more conflicts. This was especially true when they took their wages from the financial office of Project B. From time to time, disputes about wages broke out. It is also on the issue of wages where local African workers often invoke the category of "Chinese" to criticize the generally lower wage offered by Chinese construction projects.[7] Nevertheless, even there, the Chinese did not appear as a singled-out category. Rather, it is contextualized with many other foreign companies. One Congolese worker who had worked on both Chinese and other foreign construction projects told me that Chinese and Lebanese contractors offered lower wages than European ones. And for him, this was not only caused by Chinese firms themselves. He also accused workers from "across the river," namely those from Congo-Kinshasa, of being willing to accept lower wages and thus generally lowering the wages in the construction industry in Brazzaville.

The ethnography above shows how different identities are foregrounded in different interactive situations between Chinese and Africans in Project B. We see that identities based on economic relationships—*ziyingdui*, *waibaodui*, migrants, and local workers—are at least as important as geographical, ethnic, and racial ones in shaping the experiences and actions of people involved in project assemblages. Moreover, geo-ethnic-racial ones are intertwined with economic ones through differential wages. In the next section, I will discuss in more detail how identities among Chinese migrants are realigned by economic relationships.

## Project assemblage outside the construction site: Itinerant and competitive realignment of identity

### *Workers: Africa is only a stop*

The work trajectories of Chinese workers further show that China or Africa is not the main category in which to frame their working experiences. For many Chinese workers, Africa is neither the starting point of their long journey of working away from home nor the last stop. Before coming to Africa, they could well have worked in economically developed or frontier regions in China and other places outside China. Take one interviewee's work trajectory as an example. He was born in Shaanxi in 1974. His family depended on his father's hard labor and wasn't rich. When he graduated from high school, he wanted to earn his own living, so he discontinued school and went out for work. He first worked on construction sites in his hometown in 1994. A year later, in 1995, he went to Lanzhou and Jinchang (both in Gansu) to work in sunflower seed factories. In 1998, the business went downward, so he went to Wenzhou to look for better opportunities. He landed a job in a pork-processing workshop. In the following years, he worked in a food factory, a lock factory, a billboard factory, and a shoe factory. Then, he learned professional cooking and got a certificate. He worked for another four years as a cook before he got bored. He then learned plumbing and electricity techniques. Half a year later, in 2010, he got the opportunity to work overseas. After getting all the documents ready, he went abroad to work in Equatorial Guinea for the first time in 2011, as he needed more income to support his family with two young children. There, he first worked to build a supermarket in Mongomo. Then, he moved on to build a hotel in Bata. After a year, the hotel project was finished, and he returned to China in 2013. With the money he earned from working overseas, he opened a shop selling plastic products in his hometown. At that time, he thought he was still young and wanted to do something independently, namely starting his own business instead of *dagong* (working for others). His business didn't take off, however, so he liquidated the shop and restarted his career of working overseas. In 2014, he came to Congo-Brazzaville for a hotel project. He returned to China again in 2015. In early 2016, he and his wife went to Zhejiang to take up short-term jobs. Later that year, as the payments were not high enough, he came to Brazzaville again for yet another construction project.

Another of my interviewees, before coming to Congo, had worked in Indonesia, Dubai, and Algeria. In our everyday chats, he often compared the workers in these different places but came to no clear conclusions. "After all, they are pretty much similar to each other. Some are dumb, some smart; some lazy, some diligent." Talking about himself, he also saw no differences in these periods of work, where he mostly worked as a construction worker. "It's just *ganhuo* [laboring]," he told me. His tone implied a sentiment of not particularly valuing the diverse international experiences. Instead, it is just working in the same way from one site to the next, not so different from his peer workers in China. When his part of the work was done at the site of my research, he moved to another site of the same contractor.

### *Managers and entrepreneurs: Capital and employment relationships shape their experiences*

In many China-Africa studies and reports, Chinese managers are often depicted as the antithesis of African workers, representing the power of Chinese state or private capital and exploiting, if not maltreating, the latter. This narrative overlooks the fact that those managers are themselves hardly in the top echelon of their corporations/headquarters in China, and they might well develop sympathy and recognition of their African colleagues and tension toward their supervisors back home. Yang Shan, the general manager of the Congo branch of a mid-sized conglomerate in China, often complained to me about his Chinese colleagues, who supposedly are his subordinates. He said: "Alas, you see them? None of them is very much helpful. They don't do anything here. They came here just to oversee me on behalf of the headquarters." He relies on two Congolese colleagues for the daily operation of his shop and interpretation during important meetings with ministers and other high-rank officials. For him, they are way more capable than his Chinese colleagues.

Yang's experience shows that, despite being more powerful vis-à-vis his local employees, the interactions with the latter are not the entirety of his lifeworld. He also has to deal with the restrictions and regulations of his company, represented, ironically, by his Chinese colleagues. Like Chinese workers in Project B, Yang also developed close connections with his African colleagues. Here, it is the organizational structure that has shaped the relationship rather than ethnic backgrounds.

The large amount of investment in the construction industry from China to Africa brings not only numerous Chinese workers and project managers to Africa but also many entrepreneurs. Some of them come to Africa directly, and others have quit their jobs in projects or companies in Africa and set up their own enterprises. Many of them have chosen the construction industry as the main realm of their business. Apart from the huge investment in this realm, another important reason is its inherent requirement for multiple expertise and resources. Almost all large-scale construction projects need to handle an enormous amount and variety of things: sand, stones, cement, steel, wood planks, and, of course, many workers. Producing, moving, organizing, and putting them to work all give rise to the opportunities of starting new businesses. In Brazzaville, there are Chinese entrepreneurs in almost every aspect of construction: traders in construction materials, organizers of truck fleets, producers of cement, sand, and bricks, services for travel arrangements and customs clearance, and labor subcontractors.

For Chinese entrepreneurs, their relationships with larger, usually state-owned Chinese enterprises are often a source of profit as well as tension. Similar to the use of subcontracts in the management of the labor force on construction sites, the business cooperation among the Chinese in Africa, on the one hand, has facilitated the implementation of construction projects, but on the other hand, there is also competition and other forms of fission among the Chinese entrepreneurs. The competition among the truck fleets, for instance, led several of the leading entrepreneurs in this business to form a cartel-like organization to curb

the race to the bottom in price. Competitions in other businesses are even fiercer. One of the entrepreneurs who used to provide subcontract services told me that when he first started his business, he was detained by local police who received bribery and solicitation for this action from one of his competitors. Like cleavages among Chinese workers, the tension among Chinese entrepreneurs also shows that they are different elements in the construction assemblage and do not necessarily constitute a homogeneous entity.

The differences between Chinese entrepreneurs and SOE managers cause tension, especially when SOE managers' actions inflict loss on the entrepreneurs' businesses. This is not always caused by competition between SOEs and private enterprises; sometimes different rationales for initiating certain projects can lead to complaints. Wan Ding is a Chinese entrepreneur who had lived in Congo for almost ten years when I first met him in 2015. His business is diverse and started with construction. In my chats with him, I strongly felt his patriotism and positive attitude toward the Chinese government. As I am a young student studying in a more liberally oriented discipline in the United States, he seems eager to give me unsolicited lectures on such issues as freedom and democracy and convince me that the Chinese government's way of handling the student movements in the late 1980s was proper and effective, stressing that he was a university student leader back then and "had been hot-blooded" as well.

Yet his strong and sincere patriotism is not readily translated into his trust or solidarity with other Chinese people in Congo. His construction business involved subcontracting for large projects contracted with Chinese SOEs. His extensive experiences with them, however, haven't led to a very good impression with them, either. Most interestingly, he is well aware of the accusation of China for its "debt trap" to African governments, but his attitude toward such discourse is much less defensive than toward the repression of student movements. He confided to me several times that he sees much truth in this discourse.[8] For him, the aggressive strategy of many Chinese SOEs, which pushed the Congo government to borrow from Chinese creditors for construction projects, no matter if the projects were economically sustainable, contributed significantly to the extraordinarily high debt burden of Congo to China. He explains that the leaders of the branches of the SOEs in Congo are well incentivized to do this, as more borrowing and more construction projects contracted can boost their internal evaluations within their corporation, which is helpful for their promotion. Since, on average, they stay in Congo for only a few years, they don't consider the long-term sustainability of these projects or the solvability of the Congolese government. To make his argument more convincing, he even offered a counter-example of a Chinese provincial SOE, which didn't suffer as much from the delay of payment by the Congolese government as other Chinese SOEs in Congo because its leader has been in Congo for almost two decades.

According to him, he openly made these criticisms in several meetings involving Chinese government officials. And his critiques are not made for purely theoretical discussions; as the SOEs couldn't get payments from the Congolese government, they, in turn, delayed their payments to many Chinese entrepreneurs as well.

Wan's case shows that despite the close connections between Chinese economic actors in the construction industry, such connections are not always on good terms. More importantly, the reason these connections are sometimes disrupted is not that these Chinese actors are further divided into smaller ethnic or geographic groups. Rather, it is their economic identities (SOEs vs. private enterprises, employees vs. entrepreneurs, etc.) that give rise to the tensions. And such tensions are not given stereotypical ideas; they only emerge after some forms of collaboration have taken place. Hence, the concept of assemblage is useful: the elements do come together for a common project during a certain period, but such coming together doesn't guarantee or reflect any long-lasting, unquestioned trust or solidarity among them.

Sometimes, being Chinese can be a source of mistrust, a disposition largely only examined between Chinese and Africans (Schmitz 2021). Another successful and long-term Chinese entrepreneur in Congo told me in an interview that he collaborates more with Malay, Cameroonian, and Lebanese than Chinese. For him, doing business with Chinese partners is risky because the "Chinese always have the option to leave," whereas his partners are more invested in Congo and unlikely to run away overnight. Again, the reason Chinese partners are unreliable for him is not certain ethnic characteristics of Chinese, but rather their mobility and thin involvement in Congolese society.

## Conclusion

Drawing on ethnographic data in Brazzaville, this paper proposes the concept of "project assemblage" to capture the dynamics of the elements linked with each other through large-scale construction projects. I show that this concept is particularly useful for understanding the activities of Chinese migrants and companies in many African countries. It offers a perspective that links all kinds of elements together in the China-Africa connection, or more broadly, connections in the global South. The concept of assemblage shows that as far as Chinese construction projects in Africa are concerned, there are close connections between large state-owned companies and small private enterprises, between construction workers and professionals. These aspects are not separate or parallel but connected and interact with each other. Moreover, this concept does not take such identities as Chinese or African for granted. Rather, it reveals that, because of the complex economic structures and relationships, the Chinese are deeply divided in many situations. On the other hand, the apparent division between Chinese and African people is sometimes transcended. It is possible that Chinese and African people, while working together, develop emotional bonds if not solidarity. And as the economic condition changes, the activity and scale of the assemblage change as well. By showing the possibility of Chinese and Africans bonding with each other, especially among workers, I am not arguing that such bonding in some way shows China-Africa connections are in general benign, rosy, and intimate without any inequality, confrontation, or exploitation. Indeed, the bonding is definitely no more representative of China-Africa connections than the conflicts between some Chinese and Africans widely

documented by other researchers. The core question I hope to address is not which one is more representative or prevalent. Rather, I ask whether such categories as Chinese and Africans are always the most dominating factors in shaping people's experiences in China-Africa encounters. It is out of such questioning that the concept of project assemblages emerges, and its significance manifests itself.

The broader relevance of the concept of project assemblage lies in several aspects, which also implicate several possible ways of using this concept for other inquiries. First, for Africa-China studies, it provides a new perspective to understand the multiplicity of identities of Chinese in Africa. It differs from the standpoint that equalizes China with capital and Africa with labor/resource by showing the experiences of Chinese workers and the tensions among Chinese actors with different economic identities. It also differs from the approach that brings more specific geographical, ethnic, and racial categories by foregrounding the importance of economic relationships in shaping individual experiences. Chineseness and Africanness, important as they are for those involved, need to be contextualized within a wide range of other identities. Second, as Africa receives more investments in large-scale projects, project assemblages are becoming an important modality in which transnational and transcontinental encounters take place. What the Chinese in Africa experienced, as I described in this article, might be similar to those from other places who come to Africa for certain projects. Moreover, this article focuses more on the Chinese side of the encounter. There might well be similar identity realignment among Africans. My fieldwork shows, for example, that Brazzavillois workers are discontented that Kinois workers accept lower wages, which causes the general lowering of wages for construction workers in Brazzaville. With the addition of the experiences of Africans, we might better understand the social bonding and fissure in international projects in Africa. Third, it shows the value of China-Africa connections as a fertile ground to develop theories about multiple identities, especially economic ones, in global capitalism. The ethnographic data in this article show how debt relationship, subcontracting, and organizational positions can shape people's social connections differently from their ethnicity. To the extent that these are highly prevalent practices of global capitalism, the dynamics of identities in many scenarios of economic encounters between different social groups, namely "projects," can be analyzed by this concept.

In an even more general sense, this paper reflects on the use of broad-brush categories and how it can be refined by paying attention to local dynamics and local people's categories. Outside the economic realm of Africa, scholars explained how inattention to local people's notions has led to misunderstanding of local armed conflicts in Central Africa. Sometimes these conflicts are framed in national or international terms (Autesserre 2009), and sometimes in religious terms (Lombard 2016, 179–80), but in fact, there are more local and specific reasons for the conflicts. This article joins these scholars in showing the value of local categories and dynamics in properly understanding and framing of various processes in different realms.

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## Notes

**1.** To be sure, Lee (2017, 113) discussed the experiences of several Chinese foremen on construction sites in Zambia. But it was limited to the exploitation of the workers, rather than the interaction between Chinese and African workers. And the variation in the exploitation due to their different employment relationship with the main contractor, as will be shown in my ethnography below, was not mentioned.

**2.** To be clear, this is not to say geographical or racial identities are not important at all in China-Africa or other encounters. In some parts of the ethnography below, I will also show some geo-ethnic-racial categories still shape people's attitudes towards others. The point is not to prioritize it over other identity categories.

**3.** Some useful sources on this trend include, among numerous others: Siu and McGovern (2017); Alden and Large (2019); and Li (2019). Bokilo (2012) focuses on Congo-Brazzaville in particular.

**4.** Moungali is a district of Brazzaville.

**5.** *La* is a marker of the perfect tense in Chinese without any meaning by itself.

**6.** Haruyama (2022, 38), though, argues that the pidgin English used by Chinese mine managers in Zambia makes them appear "less deserving of authority" for Zambia workers. Similarly, Driessen also focused on the pidgin use between Chinese managers and Ethiopian workers despite her stress of this pidgin's role in balancing the power relationship between Chinese and Ethiopians. What I presented here, different from existing literature, is how the language is used between Chinese and Congolese *workers.* Here again, the importance of differentiating different groups of Chinese migrants in Africa manifests itself, as the different effects of pidgin languages show.

**7.** This is not to argue Chinese construction projects actually offered lower wages than other international construction contractors. I only want to show here that the category of "Chinese" is often evoked by among African workers in Congo because of their *perception* of being offered lower wages by Chinese contractors. For comparison between wages actually offered by different firms in Africa, please see Lee (2017) and Oya and Schaefer (2023).

**8.** My ethnographic description here does not aim to demonstrate whether the "debt trap" discourse is true or false, a topic many authors have discussed in great detail (e.g. Brautigam and Rithmire 2021; Hurley, Morris, and Portelance 2018). Here I am just trying to reveal how the discourse was understood and used by those directly involved in construction projects funded by loans from China.

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