

‘Under construction’: everyday anxieties and the proliferating social meanings of China in Kenya

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Introduction

Not a day passes in Kenya without one hearing a casual reference to ‘China’ or ‘the Chinese’ in any number of settings. Certainly, China and ‘Wa-China’ (‘the Chinese’ in KiSwahili) have become polysemic terms and can index a variety of phenomena: from donkeys, because of how these animals are now being sold – and even being stolen to sell – to China for medicinal purposes, as decried by residents in Naivasha,¹ to fish, in view of a recent but reversed ban on fish importations from China (see Olingo 2019), to, more frequently, the ubiquitous loans that are said to be an intricate component of China’s ‘debt-trap diplomacy’. As Mwangi (2019) argues, many of these implied significations of China and ‘the Chinese’ arise from the new demands and the differential experiences of China by local citizens – whether those citizens are small-scale traders or politicians, hawkers or local construction firms can certainly shape how China is intelligible and remade in everyday lexicons. At the same time, and as I put forward in this article, while the social meanings of China and ‘the Chinese’ are ‘under construction’, especially as the forms of China’s relationship with Kenya gain new breadths and depths, much of what it now habitually represents gestures towards anxieties that register a complex dissatisfaction with government practices (cf. Sheridan 2018). As a case in point, the two ethnographic snapshots shared below not only point to the increasing everyday references to China and ‘the Chinese’ by a variety of local actors beyond expected interlocutors (i.e. state agents), but also establish how these terms are informal synonyms, or ‘ground-level channels of discourse’ (Plummer 2019), for signposting political discontent. Quite clearly, they demonstrate how the term ‘China’ covers an increasing number of local referents and anxieties both within and outside formal Kenya–China arrangements.

Ethnographic snapshot 1: I am waiting to be served at a bank, and one employee is working through her lunch period. Noticing this, one of her colleagues asks her why she is still working despite the break, and she says, ‘The loans to China must be paid!’

Ethnographic snapshot 2: I am attending an activist meeting in a poor urban settlement in the east of Nairobi, and one young man begins to speak, lamenting the lack of political opposition in the country. He then proceeds to give the example of the new Standard

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¹‘Vigilantes join forces to stop Kenyan families losing donkeys to China’, *The Star*, 5 September 2019 <<https://www.the-star.co.ke/sasa/2019-09-05-vigilantes-join-forces-to-stop-kenyan-families-losing-donkeys-to-china/>>, accessed 20 October 2019.

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Gauge Railway train and its implication for our ‘crisis’ when he says, ‘When he was in the opposition, Raila would go and say, “The donkey is tired of the Chinese loans. *Punda imechoka* [the donkey is tired].” And then the next thing is that after the handshake he has gone with Uhuru to get another Chinese loan.’

The synonymy of China in Kenya with, for example, loans, debt and local corruption, principally through the machinations of large-scale infrastructure projects such as the Standard Gauge Railway (SGR), is consistently reinscribed in academic and media discourses (see, for example, Onjala 2018; Irandu 2017; Githaiga and Wang Bing 2019; Ndii 2018; Ghai 2019; Plummer 2019). Gesturing to the SGR and its associated loans in particular, many references to China and ‘the Chinese’ show the dominance of this train and its attendant debt as clear symbols of the Sino-Kenyan relationship and, by extension, recent political practices of the state directed towards ‘infrastructure-led development’ (Schindler and Kanai 2019).

While I build on these associations in this article, I also show how China and ‘the Chinese’ are deployed in a myriad of ways in public discourse, as is evidenced by the two ethnographic snapshots above. Ours is now a speech that is increasingly accustomed to referencing China (despite China’s emphasis on its long tenure in Africa within its political discourses; see Alden and Alves 2008; Adunbi and Butt 2019) and that is open to reproducing diversifying and often intimate social meanings of both China and ‘the Chinese’. The expansive nature of what is covered by these terms may point to the ascendancy of this relationship in Kenya’s formal political and economic arrangements, and, I would argue, also demonstrates a public grappling with the local anxieties this deepening association produces and the governance that enables it. Therefore, I suggest that if the Kenyan government is governing through large-scale infrastructure development overwhelmingly financed and built by China, then local reflections on this infrastructure are also related to its governance. Certainly, in their emergence as infrastructural articulations of national goals – for example, Vision 2030 and Uhuru Kenyatta’s Big Four Agenda – these mega-projects habitually built by Chinese state-owned companies are simultaneously the outcome of China–Kenya arrangements and government operations directed, ostensibly, towards ‘development’. Related to this argument, I aim to show how, even as the state seeks to ‘overdetermine’ (Sheridan 2018) the ways in which the concrete manifestations of the China–Kenya relationship are discussed, the architectures that materialize from this association help generate a surplus of signifiers, beyond those formally intended, which are then linked to China and ‘the Chinese’ locally.

This article builds on two years of ethnographic attunement to the ways in which these terms are deployed in a variety of settings in Kenya. Over this period, in taxi rides, in pronouncements by politicians and activists, and even in my own family discussions, I have noted the diverse and relational meanings of China and ‘the Chinese’ in Kenya. This attention to the everyday is supplemented by surveys of local news, especially on the SGR and the recently proposed expressway between Jomo Kenyatta International Airport (JKIA) and Westlands. Furthermore, the key arguments within this article are also informed by participation in a ‘Nairobi Expressway Project’ public consultation that was organized by the county of Nairobi in late November 2019, semi-structured interviews, and a

growing familiarity with the literature, both regional and international, that takes up varying positions on Sino-African (or 'Afro-China') relations.

Alongside the methods that draw predominantly from an ethnographic toolbox (participant observation, interviews, etc.) and media surveys, I have also participated in a number of academic meetings on this theme in the region. Within these forums, I have noted that the discourses that have the most purchase often do not capture ordinary citizens' sentiments about China–Africa arrangements. In addition, because of their state-centric focus, many of these academic interventions, though certainly important, are unable to comprehensively interrogate how the terms China and 'the Chinese' assemble a myriad of evolving phenomena and subject agencies (cf. Mohan and Lampert 2013). Related surveys, such as those from Afrobarometer, have asked questions such as 'What do Africans think of the burgeoning Chinese presence in their respective countries?' (Gadzala and Hanusch 2010). However, although critical, this focus misses the messiness in between, the complicated and sometimes contradictory ways through which China is understood and deployed in micro-level practices. While recognizing that local understandings of these terms multiply every day, the combined methods adopted as part of this research process have allowed me to discern how China and 'the Chinese' continue to be 'under construction', while concomitantly indexing anxieties about local government practices for 'development'.

This article does not aim to retrace studies or statistics about the presence of China in Kenya. Nor is it interested in assuming an explicit position that is either for or against: there already exists much scholarship that looks at this 'tantalizing subject' (Lee 2017) from these various perspectives. Furthermore, it bypasses the circular contestations surrounding what 'the West' says about China and what state-level China (and Africa) says in response to what 'the West' says about China's presence in Africa, in order to focus on the expanding social meanings of China and 'the Chinese' in Kenya. I argue that these social meanings, which are often marshalled around large-scale construction projects that are a by-product of ongoing 'infrastructure-led development', exceed such projects and are continuously remade even while they remain oriented around questions about local governance. Correspondingly, these expanding referents inevitably reflect the expansion of Sino-African alliances on the continent even as they decentre the China–Africa state relationships that have territorialized 'the Chinese' in the region, primarily over the last two decades. By refracting the vast 'curious' (Lee 2017) attention to 'the Chinese' and China, I aim to show the role played by everyday publics in reconstructing meanings of China and 'the Chinese' that signal a plethora of situated and evolving signifiers. These social meanings concentrate and make evident the assemblage of what Mbembe and Roitman referred to as 'systems of intelligibility to which people refer in order to construct a more or less clear idea of the causes of phenomena and their effects, to determine the domain of what is possible and feasible as well as the logics of efficacious action' (1995: 324).

I begin with a brief review of some of the literature that has shaped understandings of China in Kenya; this will be followed by a discussion of my main arguments, anchored within the ethnographic portrayal of a November 2019 'Nairobi Expressway Project' public consultation. Through events at this meeting, I would like to show how China and 'the Chinese' presence are continually re-established through construction practices, but also imbricated in a multitude of layered signifiers that register local anxieties referenced within but also

beyond this consultation. Some of these associations are discussed in the section that follows, where I refer to forty signifiers of China and ‘the Chinese’ in Kenya documented during my fieldwork. It is important to note, however, that a full deconstruction of all terms is beyond the scope of this article. I conclude with a summary of my main findings and suggest directions for future research on the expanding social meanings of China in Africa.

Literature review

There is no consensus on how to think about Afro-China engagements on the continent (Manji and Marks 2007). A review of the vast literature on this theme, the majority written over the last fifteen years, reveals equally fervent voices against ‘exploitation’, ‘colonization’ and the ‘new scramble for Africa’ as well as those who are eager to have a ‘Southern’ actor thwart the long-standing, and equally fraught, script between the (colonial) ‘West’ and Africa. Assuredly, propagators of this latter view see it as an alliance that will challenge the colonial hegemony of nations such as the US and the UK (for early discussions of this, see Manji and Marks 2007; Alden and Alves 2008; Campbell 2008).

Against this background, Musambayi Katumanga of the Department of Political Science at the University of Nairobi alerts us to typologies that may distinguish trends in this expansive scholarship. In his view, there are two dominant categories: (1) the ‘China is extracting from Africa’ discourse; and (2) the ‘win-win for Africa’ position that refers to a ‘symmetrical relationship’ and a ‘sincere friendship’. He argues that what is missing from these framings are interrogations of what African states really seek for themselves.² Standing oblique to this state-centric position, while also discerning a key gap, Manji and Marks (2007) argue that what is ‘lost in the cacophony has been the voices of independent African analysts and activists’.

It is also important to note that, within these popular debates, Africa is examined broadly, with very little analysis situated at the level of the state, even when Chinese state capitalism, in its heterogeneity, negotiates predominantly at the country and not the regional level (Alden and Alves 2008; Brautigam 2011; Lee 2017). With the exception of Angola (see, for example, de Morais 2011; Power and Alves 2012) and Zambia (see, for example, Mwanawina 2008; Negi 2008; Lee 2017), Chinese investment in particular countries has not been analysed as comprehensively as it has been at the level of the continent. Nevertheless, there has been an increase in more situated evaluations of ‘African perceptions’ that intentionally seek to absent state- and regional-level analyses (see, for example, Sautman and Hairong 2009; Gadzala and Hanusch 2010), efforts that aim to demystify the ‘on the ground’ experiences of Chinese workers on the continent (for example, Schmitz 2014; Sheridan 2018; 2019) as well as Chinese citizens’ opinions of Africa and vice versa (Shen 2009 is one example). With its focus on the socially constructed meanings of China and ‘the Chinese’ in Kenya, this article contributes to this interdisciplinary scholarship.

²This analysis was part of a keynote speech that Professor Musambayi Katumanga gave at a conference on Sino-African relations at the University of Nairobi in October 2019.

China was among the first countries to open an embassy in Nairobi in 1963, soon after Kenya got its independence. However, even amidst contentions about whether there has been continuity or discontinuity in China's presence in Africa (Alden and Alves 2008), what is agreed upon is that the Sino-Kenyan alliance expanded immensely with the arrival of the Kibaki regime in 2002 (Mwangi 2019). Since then, the governments of Uhuru Kenyatta, heralded by both the 2013 and 2017 elections, have sought to strengthen this relationship, which is mostly articulated in infrastructural terms. Specifically, loans for infrastructure development have dominated the bilateral agreements between China and Kenya, evidenced by two iconic architectural projects in particular: the Thika Superhighway, launched in 2012, and the SGR, inaugurated in 2017 (Plummer 2019). What's more, the 'infrastructure-led development' (Schindler and Kanai 2019) adopted locally and reflected in local and regional vision plans (i.e. the African Union's Agenda 2063, Kenya Vision 2030 and the Plan for Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA)) is paving the way for more far-reaching engagements by China in Kenya and on the continent more widely.

Sautman and Hairong (2009: 739) write that 'the primary factors underpinning African perceptions of China are not social factors, but rather the national political discourse on China–Africa in individual African States'. In this article, while privileging the public sphere, I also affirm the importance of the formal political arrangements that have shaped the findings of Sautman and Hairong (*ibid.*), and challenge Gadzala and Hanusch's assertion that 'the influence of national discourse cannot be said to be of equal consequence among those Africans who are largely removed from national politics' (2010: 7). This is because the simple but consistent ethnographic survey that informs this article has made it clear that it is principally those who are 'removed from national politics' who continue to extend the politicized social meanings of China and 'the Chinese'. They do this as a response to the 'national discourse' and its material articulations, and they employ orality – whether through the 'digital grapevine', rumours, hearsay or even everyday speech (Plummer 2019) – to ensure that these terms become 'socially meaningful semantic categor[ies]' (Zhang 2018: 1). Without a doubt:

In the absence of quality decision making that is participatory and transparent, individuals are using counter-channels of discourse to critique their government's engagements with China and make calls for remediation. Counter-channels provide either virtual (online) or real (interpersonal) spaces where individuals can express their views on their government's infrastructural engagements with China. These channels run counter to official government communication. (Plummer 2019: 681)

In this process, and in ways that are open-ended, these 'counter-channels of discourse' register increasing socio-political and economic anxieties through the expanding associations of China and 'the Chinese' that, as we will see below, recentre government practices and decentre China and its citizens.

Under construction

For over a decade, the Chinese government has invested in Kenya's infrastructure, taking over responsibilities Kenyans expect their government to fulfill. (Meiu 2020)

At a recent academic forum on Sino-African relations in Nairobi, a panellist speaking about the increasing power in Africa of StarTimes TV (a Chinese media company with its headquarters in Beijing) shared that ‘when we were young we just knew the Chinese as the people of Kung Fu’.³ Beyond this reductive stereotype, and as the growing literature on China in Africa demonstrates, China and ‘the Chinese’ are now discursively linked to much more than just martial arts. The synonymy of China with infrastructure development in the region may be why an Ethiopian taxi driver I met in Addis Ababa in mid-2019 replied, after I asked about China’s presence in Ethiopia, that they were ‘under construction’. While this was unexpected syntax, I understood his intervention more poetically, as a double gesture: at once a validation of China’s dominant position in infrastructural processes on the continent and a recognition of the shifting and expanding meanings of China and ‘the Chinese’ in Ethiopia, as in Kenya. Ultimately, I took this response as an indicator not only of the role of Chinese state companies in shaping urban landscapes across the region – therefore literally under construction – but also as an index of the multiple and expanding signifiers of China in the public sphere.

A survey of government and presidential narratives illustrates that these two terms convey normative politico-economic associations linked to ‘progress’, ‘modernity’, ‘development’, the local ‘Big Four Agenda’, and the ‘anti-imperialist’ position of Kenya and the ‘sincere friendship’ of China. Certainly, this need to move away from ‘imperialism’ was much discussed in the context of the president’s and vice president’s indictment at the International Criminal Court in the Hague after the 2007–08 post-election violence;⁴ it can also be extended to the present, especially in view of the ‘South–South’ discourses that are constitutive of China’s charm offensive in Africa (cf. Sheridan 2018). One young senator affiliated to the ruling party with whom I spoke shared, perhaps expectedly, similar views to those espoused by the government through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Our conversation took place not long after he had returned from a state-sponsored trip to China, and within it he affirmed to me how ‘positive’ this relationship was and commended the ways in which it directed Kenya away from colonial trajectories. In his words, the fact that the ‘Chinese have removed millions of peasants from poverty on the backs of Africans’ through infrastructural contracts undertaken on the continent was laudable, and something that we ‘Africans’ could learn from.⁵ This statement could be one of the ‘myths about Africa and China’ (Sheridan 2018: 145) that circulates as a consequence of greater bilateral proximity, or a reproduction of the long-established

³This statement is from a panellist at a recent China–Africa conference at the University of Nairobi.

⁴For more on ‘Uhuru’s tough talk on imperialism’, see Barasa (2013).

⁵Conversation with senator from Jubilee Party, 24 September 2019. From this statement, I inferred that the senator was referring to infrastructure jobs that Chinese workers have been able to take up on the continent as a consequence of the significant role played by Chinese construction companies in large-scale African infrastructure development since the early 2000s. In this regard, these projects enable large sums of money to circulate in China, as a consequence of the remittances sent home by the construction companies and their workers, as well as the equipment bought from and loans paid back to China. It is my understanding that the senator considered these infrastructure contracts and the attendant monies paid as key catalysts for the removal of ‘millions of peasants from poverty’ in China.

trope that juxtaposes the continent's fates and futures after independence with those of Asia, and in particular Singapore.⁶ Whatever the case, implicit in this comparison is Asia's rapid development and Africa's 'lagging behind', and the construction of recent mega-infrastructures in Kenya, such as the SGR, are seen to be motivated by this bid to enable a 'new chapter in Kenya's history' (Okoth 2017; Kimari and Ernstson 2020) – one filled with the 'progress' and 'modernity' that Sino-Kenyan alliances are said to pursue.

In its foregrounding of infrastructure, this targeted future of 'development' is connected with China to facilitate mega-projects that make clear, as Pitcher and Moorman (2015: 130) have noted in Angola, that, first, 'the government has a vision for the future and second, it can deliver on that vision'. Below, I use a public consultation for the proposed JKIA–Westlands expressway, a derivative of this 'new chapter' entangled within Sino-African alliances, to demonstrate the expanding social meanings of China in Kenya and the ways in which these also speak to public anxieties about the Kenyan government's inability to achieve both 'vision' and 'delivery'.

Construction of the JKIA–Westlands expressway was launched by President Uhuru Kenyatta on 16 October 2019 (Ukaya 2019). The formal motivations for its inauguration that were circulated in the press after its launch included the indisputable need to reduce the time it took to reach the airport and the notorious traffic that the Institute of Economic Affairs suggests results in the loss of up to KSh 50 million day (roughly US\$500,000) (Ahmed 2019). While the inauguration of the Thika Superhighway and the SGR were met with public fanfare (Plummer 2019), however limited, the proposed expressway was immediately contested by a wide array of local actors. One young environmental activist stated:

First there was online outrage, but even at that point we didn't have the clear picture of the map of the expressway, we had very scanty information until the public hearing. But before the public hearing they did not intend to have the public hearing, and so we used to go to Uhuru Park every Thursday just to create awareness.⁷

But the abrupt nature of the project's announcement and the 'scanty information' available were not the only causes for concern. During an interview, a local city planner lamented that this project was not part of the landmark projects detailed in the 2014 masterplan for Nairobi, validating statements questioning the hurried manner in which it was announced, and also that no environmental impact assessment had been conducted before the expressway was approved. All of these contentions were brought to the fore in the consultations seemingly prompted by the immediate public contestation of the expressway project.

Roughly thirty people participated in the November 2019 consultation I attended for the Nairobi expressway. The location was a police training college, catering specifically to those who would go on to work for the Directorate of Criminal Investigations. Perhaps the prospect of going to a police training college for a 'public participation' process played a part in reducing the numbers at the meeting. The early morning start time on a work day could also

⁶For a recent example of this in Kenya, see Ayieko (2020) and, elsewhere, Caryl (2015).

⁷Personal communication with unnamed activist.

have dampened attendance. Whatever the reason, many of the seats put out for attendees remained unused, and, consequently, as we began, the master of ceremonies asked the small crowd, dispersed like islands among the rows of plastic chairs, to move to the front.

Like most government–citizen meetings in Kenya, state representatives from the transport ministry sat facing the audience at the front of the room, which had been partitioned in two. These officials were flanked on one side by uniformed police and local administration representatives from this particular constituency. To start us off – also akin to other government meetings that would take place that day – we were told to rise for prayer. Intoned in this intercession was the request that the meeting should proceed successfully.

At the right side of the table of state representatives, facing the audience, was a mounted presentation of an unclear blueprint of the proposed expressway, with place names marked within small yellow circles (see [Figure 1](#)). On the handout given to attendees, the proposed route and its access points were equally illegible.

After the prayer, the chief engineer responsible for the project rose to speak, and in his narrative he emphasized how the proposed expressway would ‘put Kenya at the front’, ‘give us a competitive edge’, and ‘reduce congestion’ and road deaths. Following him, those assigned to manage the social impacts of the project then detailed a number of plans to be implemented: a construction management plan, a labour management plan and even an HIV engagement plan because of the projected public health consequences of the influx of labour to and around the proposed road construction sites.

The China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC) is the Chinese state company tasked with building the expressway. Yet, no representative from the CRBC was at the consultation; instead, Centric Africa, a recently constituted environmental impact assessment consulting company (without a working website at the time, and, we were to learn later in the meeting, no prior experience of conducting environmental impact assessments for similar large-scale projects) was to stand in for them.

After lengthy speeches by a number of state officials, the floor was now open for questions. And, from the first moment of this segment, anxiety was articulated through a number of personal and collective concerns. An elder in a Sikh community school expressed fear that the community facilities they had in the area would be demolished to make way for the expressway; a pastor worried that the noise and pollution from the construction efforts would affect his church’s services; and a representative from a nearby car dealership was troubled that the elevated infrastructure would cast a shadow on these commercial premises.

Also raised was the concern that the CRBC was contracted to construct this expressway, given that the company had been ‘debarred’ by the World Bank in 2009 for engaging in corrupt practices in the Philippines (World Bank 2011), and it has yet to be transparent about the contractual terms of the SGR that it built locally (Ghai 2019). Discontent with the CRBC’s role was further exacerbated when it became clear that the money from the expressway tolls would all go to the CRBC for thirty years until the ‘debt’ was paid off – a concern that the most senior government official at the meeting wrote off as the appropriate bounty for a company that would take on all of the ‘risk’ of the venture. Although, as described in the consultation handout, ‘the purpose of the stakeholder engagement is to consult with interested and affected parties in the public and private sectors in the decision-making process on projects which may



FIGURE 1 The Nairobi Expressway project presentation at one of the public consultations. Source: WildlifeDirect Twitter page.

affect them’, one participant expressed the view that attendees were being fed ‘baraza stories’⁸ – placated by being told that they were shaping the course of the expressway, when, in reality, what citizens needed to do was question the necessity of the project.

Through their anxieties about displacement, economic and ecological livelihoods, national debt, actual public participation and the lack of transparency in the proposed and existing projects built by the CRBC and other Chinese companies, those present linked these concerns to China and ‘the Chinese’. Focusing on autochthony contestations and the foreign gaze attributed to plastic in northern Kenya, Meiu (2020: 227) argues that ‘as plastic became prevalent, rural Samburu objectified it in light of their own moral dilemmas’. I contend that the same process occurs locally; in this case, construction, as the principal vector, helps canalize situated dilemmas through references to China and ‘the Chinese’. While in this consultation the focus was the viability of the proposed JKIA–Westlands expressway, it became a site on which a number of personal and national contentions were brought to bear, and that simultaneously worked to generate associations for these terms that went beyond those delimited by formal China–Kenya arrangements.

Even if the CRBC was not in the room, China – and, by extension, ‘the Chinese’ – were linked to possible school demolitions, the overshadowing of small and big businesses, air pollution and future obstruction of church services,

⁸Baraza is a Swahili word for a meeting, but habitually refers to government–citizen assemblies convened by government administrators in localities where, for example, state-appointed chiefs dominate. This could be in rural or poor urban areas. While participation is implied by the word ‘baraza’, these meetings are customarily spaces where this is tokenized and state interventions are privileged, hence one attendee at this Nairobi expressway forum referring to the consultation as a space for ‘baraza stories’.

among other laments. Next, I dwell on the widely expressed concern that more than an acre of Uhuru Park, a public green space, would be hived off to allow for the building of the expressway. As we will see below, these concerns resonated with other wider anxieties; in interviews after the consultation, these fears were captured by what one activist elaborated as ‘elusive development’ – national projects that would not benefit the majority of people – and what another observer termed as a ‘government highly responsible for not living up to its sovereignty’.

Online, the sentiments were the same, as was patently clear in the #SaveUhuruPark and the #HandsOffUhuruPark campaigns on Twitter and beyond. These spontaneous digital initiatives occurred on Twitter and WhatsApp and in news media spaces, as well as in grounded ‘counter-channel’ activist assemblies in the park itself. Certainly, the histories that this space condenses, coupled with what are seen as the *problématiques* of ongoing Kenya–China alliances for future-making, did much to provoke these heated contestations. While Uhuru means ‘freedom’ and is also, interestingly, the first name of the current president of Kenya, this park has become the site and symbol of many struggles directed towards the attainment of freedoms that have not consistently been guaranteed. The resistance efforts of the mothers of political prisoners were conducted here in the early 1990s; their protests were against the detention of their sons in Nyayo House’s torture chambers located opposite this green space. And in the same era, demonstrations linked to Wangari Maathai prevented the revanchist and land-grabbing tendencies of the Moi regime, and saved Uhuru Park from becoming a concrete extension of the city (Maathai and McDonald 2019). Furthermore, the ‘Freedom Corner’ section of the park is habitually the site where protests with a range of motivations convene or culminate, and, correlatively, it houses one of the few national monuments to the Mau Mau freedom fighters in the country. In addition, from time to time, this green space in the centre of the city is used for religious, social, cultural and political meetings of all types, primarily by Nairobi’s precariat. Above all, however, it is recognized overwhelmingly as a working-class recreational venue, a free green space for the many Nairobi dwellers who do not have gardens in their homes or neighbourhoods. Since it embodies these multiple functions for the city’s poorer majority, the cavalier declaration by the government that 1.3 acres would be used to construct an expensive airport highway built by ‘the Chinese’, something that would be inaccessible to most of Nairobi’s commuters, prompted significant push-back by Kenyans of diverse backgrounds. This discontent also worked to generate a surplus of associations with China and ‘the Chinese’.

In this regard, while referencing Nairobi and Tsavo national parks and Ololua Forest in her tweet denouncing the proposed expressway,⁹ Paula Kahumbu, the CEO of the conservation NGO Wildlife Direct, gestured towards what are widely taken for granted as the anti-environment practices of China in Africa (see also Adunbi and Butt 2019). Other online statements in defence of Uhuru Park referred to prominent lamentations circulating about infrastructure financed and developed by ‘the Chinese’ in Kenya, such as the SGR. Wambui, a female activist from one of the larger poor urban settlements in the city, was more explicit in expressing her grievances. In a popular activist WhatsApp group, she wrote:

⁹Paula Kahumbu tweet, 31 October 2019.

Ni funny [it's funny] we are taking loans *ndio tufike* [so we can reach] *westie* [Westlands] from JKIA in fifteen minutes. *Hii ni ufala gana?* [What foolishness is this?] *Alafu hiyo loan itatu* make financial slaves to *WaChinku* for 30 years [and then this loan will make us financial slaves to 'the Chinese' for 30 years].¹⁰

From this statement and those discussed above, we can see the cross-pollination of individual and collective signifiers of China and 'the Chinese' that are consistently being reproduced in the country and that (re-)emerged in the contestation around the proposed expressway. Wambui's speech, like those of others who participated in the consultation and in the array of actions under the #SaveUhuruPark or #HandsOffUhuruPark campaign, became at once an index and metonym (Sheridan 2018) and shows how these terms concomitantly register loans, infrastructure, debt, anti-environment practices and even 'financial slavery'. While discursively linked to China, such discourses displace it, functioning primarily as proxies that anchor these wider anxieties in the *ufala* practices of the government.

Unquestionably, other events continue to signal the proliferating social meanings of China and 'the Chinese' in Kenya. During my year of intentionally documenting associated referents – in taxis, banks, activist meetings and beyond – the rhizomatic qualities of these nouns became increasingly apparent, illustrating the metamorphosing understandings and affects of Sino-African relations in the public sphere. Below, in no particular order, is a tally of forty intersecting associations with China and 'the Chinese' that I noted during this research period:

1. Donkeys
2. Avocados
3. Corruption
4. Infrastructure
5. Good roads
6. Bad roads
7. Railway
8. Poaching
9. Construction
10. 'Railway to Nowhere'
11. Apartment complexes
12. Badly finished apartment complexes
13. Racism
14. Bad working conditions on roads and the railway
15. Good workers
16. Late-night spas
17. Prostitution
18. Trade imbalance
19. Cybercrime
20. Kung fu
21. Non-English or Kiswahili speaking
22. Isolated community

¹⁰Wambui, conversation in an activist WhatsApp group, 18 October 2019.

23. Plastic rice and eggs
24. Fake food
25. Fish
26. Garlic
27. Famine relief in Turkana that included beer
28. Abandoned mixed-race babies: 'Thika Road babies'
29. Low-quality goods
30. Cheap goods
31. Coal plant
32. Lamu Port/LAPSSET
33. Gikomba market and the displacement of small-scale traders
34. Eat anything
35. #HandsOffUhuruPark/JKIA–Westlands expressway
36. Construction in the national park
37. Electronics trade
38. Wholesale goods
39. Ivory
40. Rhino horns

Of these associations, perhaps a third relate to construction. In this regard, while the synonymy of China and 'the Chinese' to infrastructure is also seen in other countries on the continent, such as Angola (Croese 2012), most of these references are situated in the particular socio-political and economic dynamics of Kenya–China relations. Beyond the connections to railways, expressways and debt that have been discussed earlier, links to, for example, racism stem from other events, such as when a Chinese restaurant in the city refused to accept African patrons for evening meals in 2015, the uneven labour relations within SGR operations (see Kimari and Ernstson 2020), and even the video of a young Chinese worker who was caught on camera calling the president a monkey.¹¹ Other surprising societal links to 'the Chinese', such as late-night spas, prostitution and 'Thika Road babies',¹² make evident that analyses of the practices and experiences of China in Africa can no longer be relegated solely to the formal political and economic domain, but must now also dwell on and in our intimate fabrics.

Meiu (2020) confirms the connections between China and plastic rice, plastic goods and infrastructure in Kenya. Equally, in examining the myths about Chinese people in Dar es Salaam, Sheridan (2018) details the reproducing associations that link them with wholesale trade, roads, electronics, shoes, ivory and even petty trade, such as 'selling peanuts on the streets of Dar es Salaam'. Referents such as 'eat everything' emerge from historically racist depictions of Chinese people that have circulated across time and space to take up additional meaning in Kenya, and have, certainly, gained more traction in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

What is the 'significance of [this] ordinary hyperbole' (Sheridan 2018: 149)? In this article, I have sought to make evident the expanding and increasingly layered

¹¹'Kenya deports Chinese man over "racist rant"', BBC News, 6 September 2018 <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-45433434>>, accessed 30 June 2020.

¹²These are children of Kenyan and Chinese heritage born when the CRBC was building Thika highway (see Kahura 2019).

social meanings of China and 'the Chinese' in Kenya. It is my argument that these associations, while not complete or embodying total power, and although they may be a result of more extensive Kenya–China relations, are anchored in wider anxieties about local political governance. The far-reaching nature of these referents – across political, ecological, societal and economic spheres – is testament to the ways in which, on the level of the everyday, ordinary citizens remake what is understood as China and 'the Chinese' in Kenya to help congeal and articulate political disaffection, and these meanings are constructed away from the bilateral fanfare that allows for a 'hegemonic production of Chinese-ness' (Ong 1996: 748, cited in Zhang 2018: 7; cf. Shen 2009) and local development. As a consequence of these grounded vernacular engagements, 'the Chinese presence in Africa semiotically exceeds the materiality of people and things Chinese' (Sheridan 2018: 154).

It is worth restating that the undertone of some of these associations reveals racialized relations of being whose tenor is smoothed over by government references to 'misunderstanding[s] and unresolved cultural differences' (Kimari and Ernstson 2020). What's more, though not broached sufficiently on the continent, local and travelling versions of 'yellow peril' (Plummer 2019; Park 2013) are provincialized in local terms such as 'Chinku' and 'Ching-Chong', references to how the Chinese 'eat everything', or even a derogatory mimicking of supposed Chinese speaking practices.

Writing about this racism in African-based media, Park critiques the reporting of 'Sino-African engagement':

Some media coverage of Sino-African engagement has leaned dangerously close to 'yellow peril' journalism, sometimes tipping into racist accusations of China's role in a 'new scramble' for Africa's precious natural resources and ludicrous allegations of Beijing's supposedly nefarious plots to (re)populate Africa and commandeer fertile lands to meet its growing needs. There are, without doubt, some legitimate concerns about uneven trade relations, labour abuses, environmental impacts and the extra-legal activities of certain Chinese firms and individuals in Africa. Several African countries have witnessed increasing tensions between locals and Chinese newcomers. However, the complexities of the multitude of actors, projects and situations across the continent defy a single narrative story. (Park 2013: 152)

Similarly, Shen (2009), who has done comparable work on Chinese online perceptions of Africa and Africans, portrays the associations or '(un)reality' of how they are constructed on these internet platforms. Interestingly, these notions appear in direct opposition to how 'the Chinese' are perceived in Africa, as seen from the list of associations above. While the stereotypes of Africans in this online discourse include 'poor', 'lazy', 'sexist' and 'threatening', affirming a *longue durée* pathologization of Africans (Shen 2009; Kimari and Ernstson 2020), the increasing social meanings of China and 'the Chinese' mentioned above, for the most part, link them relationally to processes enacted towards 'progress', 'modernity' and 'development',¹³ however contested this may be. Shen (2009: 442) adds that 'Africans have become convenient straw men through whom Chinese users

¹³See also Zhang (2018) on Madagascar.

can project their wished-for Chinese identities'. In the same vein, I would add that everyday understandings of China and 'the Chinese' in Kenya point towards locally 'wished-for' enactments of the state. Essentially, as a 'mental construction and reconstruction' (*ibid.*: 442) of what China and 'the Chinese' are, in a context where Kenya–China relations and what they mean are heavily traded within a closed, hyper-masculine and state-centric manner, these local associations are 'counter-channel' assertions that indicate that ideas about China and 'the Chinese' – and, by extension, government practices with and without this alliance – will continue to be socially remade and remain 'under construction'.

Conclusion

Away from state-centric narratives or polls about how Africans or Kenyans perceive China, this article has offered an ethnographic lens into the expanding everyday social meanings of China and 'the Chinese' in Kenya. Plummer (2019: 684) states that 'by ignoring the experiences of African communities' interactions with their governments and diverse Chinese actors in Africa, researchers miss the opportunity to unpack how Africans are making sense of China's new role on the continent' – and, I would add, grappling with wider anxieties about the nature of their own governance.

While the SGR, loans and infrastructure broadly function as default proxies for China and 'the Chinese' in Kenya, additional referents to these terms proliferate every day, extend beyond construction and are linked, as I have attempted to show here, with questions and fears about 'elusive development' and governance. Zhang (2018) discusses how 'being Chinese' in Madagascar is invested in both long and short histories, the work that Chinese do in the country and the varied shifting spatial and temporal social encounters between local Malagasy and Chinese descendants. Similarly, Lee (2017: 9) asserts that 'in Africa, Chinese state interests must contend with local African political, economic and social pressures'. Correspondingly, and as I argue here, delimited state–state constructions of Kenya–China relations encounter the everyday reconfigurations of China and 'the Chinese' and how the government is understood to fit and act in these equations. Certainly, the social meanings discussed in this article, which critically engage 'win–win' and 'South–South' cooperation bromides, demonstrate that the charm offensive statements about 'brotherhood' and 'equal partners' can never be complete (cf. Sheridan 2018).

Moving away from polarizing and top-down analyses has allowed me to demonstrate the open-endedness of the social meanings of China in Kenya, even while China is decentred in these on-the-ground analyses. While much literature has sought to respond to the question 'What is China doing in Africa?', attention to the everyday scale shows not only 'what' China is doing but how its bilateral practices are being understood and included in everyday social lexicons; how both the Chinese state and its people are linked with railways, donkeys, fish, ports, late-night spas – always under construction. Future research on the expanding associations of the Sino-Kenyan alliance may examine how Chinese workers are shaped by them, and can also look at the gendered implications and vernacular articulations of Kenya–China effects and the particular anxieties they may index.

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Abstract

Much has been said about the presence of China in Africa over the last fifteen years, with, for the most part, these discussions affirming either a 'for' or 'against' position. Working from a micro-level perspective, this ethnographic article looks at how the everyday associations of 'China' and 'the Chinese' in Kenya are increasing, engendering expansive signifiers that proliferate as Kenya's relationship with China deepens. Although I anchor this argument in the local discursive practices that shape the proposed Jomo Kenyatta International Airport (JKIA)–Westlands expressway, I trace how references to China and the Chinese expand beyond construction to take up social meanings that are continuously being assembled. Although the referents may seem unrelated in their diversity, I argue that they index wider local anxieties that de-centre China and re-centre the Kenyan government in practices that place the burdens of 'development' on the country's already burdened citizens.

Résumé

On a beaucoup dit sur la présence de la Chine en Afrique ces quinze dernières années, avec des discussions qui, pour la plupart, affirment une position « pour » ou « contre ». Se plaçant dans une perspective au niveau micro, cet article ethnographique examine l'augmentation des associations courantes de « la Chine » et « les Chinois » au Kenya, engendrant des signifiants expansifs qui prolifèrent tandis que la relation entre le Kenya et la Chine s'intensifie. Bien que le point d'ancrage de cet argument soit les pratiques discursives locales autour du projet de voie rapide entre l'aéroport international Jomo Kenyatta (JKIA) et les Westlands,

l'auteur décrit comment les références à la Chine et aux Chinois dépassent la construction elle-même pour prendre des sens sociaux qui se forment continuellement. Malgré l'absence apparente de lien entre les référents dans leur diversité, l'auteur soutient qu'ils sont révélateurs d'anxiétés locales plus larges qui décentrent la Chine et recentrent le gouvernement kényan au cœur de pratiques qui font peser le poids du « développement » sur les épaules des citoyens du pays, déjà accablés.