

Kenya and China's labour relations: infrastructural development for whom, by whom?

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Introduction

In 2008, the Kenyan government implemented its Vision 2030 development programme. The programme's goal was to transform Kenya into a newly industrializing, middle-income country with far-reaching political, economic and social reforms. The Vision 2030 Delivery Secretariat, the body responsible for administering the development policy, has undertaken a robust agenda that focuses on large-scale infrastructure. Simultaneously, China's Belt and Road initiative, a project aimed at developing overland and maritime trade routes connecting Asian, European and African countries, corresponds with Kenya's goal to secure its role as the gateway to Eastern and Central Africa. Kenya's geostrategic position provides much-desired access to consumer markets as well as the facilitation of extractive industries in South Sudan, Uganda and the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Both Vision 2030 and the Belt and Road initiative call for substantial investments in Africa's transport sectors, a policy that is similar in conception and practice to those carried out during colonialism. However, today the rationale is different. On the macro-level, the rationale is that investments in telecommunications, energy and transport will increase foreign direct investment in the country and the region. On the micro-level, there is an assumption that large-scale capital investments in infrastructure will promote economic growth by integrating rural areas with urban business centres. For Kenya, investments in transport are viewed as an imperative, because its landlocked neighbours Tanzania, South Sudan and Uganda rely on its road and rail network, along with the port in Mombasa, to reach global markets. Conversely, the East Africa region, home to 230 million consumers, is an attractive destination for products, particularly from China.

Foreign direct investment by emerging economies such as China has been a vital part of Kenya's growth strategy. Kenyan policymakers believe that the delivery of mega transport projects will boost their competitiveness in global markets and increase the possibilities for high-value production in different sectors. However, there is a growing body of research that is challenging the assumption that costly investments in transport infrastructure are a prerequisite for growth. For example, Ansar *et al.* (2016), in a scoping study of infrastructure projects in China, argue that investment in infrastructure has a detrimental effect on an economy because in most cases projects assume massive debt that leads to economic fragility. China's engagement with Africa has included significant

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debt-financed investments in transport infrastructure. This engagement brings inevitable conflicts between diverse actors from China and local Kenyan communities, who must contend with the ambiguities of China's role in Africa and its implications for the labour market.

Within the Kenyan context, where exogenous factors have historically driven development, infrastructure delivery is a political process, and 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. In the cases of the Thika Highway project and Standard Gauge Railway (SGR), two Kenyan infrastructural projects, there was a robust discourse that often took the form of hearsay and rumour that exposed a different interpretation of China's role in rebuilding Kenya's transport networks. An analysis of informant interviews, Kenyan-based blogs and news forums, street protest messages and investigative news reports revealed that the initial excitement that new roads, bridges and railways were being built in a nation whose infrastructure had scarcely been updated after the 1960s was quickly eclipsed by youth who claimed that they had been displaced by Chinese labourers, in some cases prisoners. The central question that surfaced was: who should build and maintain Kenya's infrastructure? Consequently, through rumour and posts on social media, these ground-level channels of discourse revealed popular understandings of labour relations between Africa and China that provide a nuanced critique of the outcome of exogenously led infrastructure.

China's role in Kenya's infrastructure sector stands at the intersection of several issues involving migrant labour and local rumours of Chinese prisoners and the state's vision for industrialization and youth employment. Each of these issues has its own set of historical and contemporary contexts that provide a framework to understand the relationships between local communities, the Kenyan state and China. On the one hand, local communities are interpreting and responding to ground-level political and economic shifts, and, on the other, the Kenyan government struggles to finance and carry out large-scale infrastructure projects with the aim of inviting a new era of industrialization. The first case examined here is the Thika Highway project, which was completed in 2012. The prison labour rumour within the context of contemporary understandings of labour, migration and infrastructure provides a framework for unpacking how local communities contested Kenya's and China's labour arrangements and practices. It is not a matter of whether rumours of Chinese prison labour should be circulating in Kenya, and in other African nations; it is instead essential to understand why it is happening. As for the Kenyan government's vision for industrialization and integration, youth unemployment is a constituent element of the development process. The second case, the Mombasa–Nairobi SGR, which was launched in 2017, demonstrated the power of counter-channels of discourse in amplifying critiques of Chinese labour and employment practices in the rail sector, where claims of racism and neocolonialism have emerged.

The Thika Highway project

One of Kenya's most widely followed infrastructure projects, in both traditional media and social media, was the Nairobi–Thika Highway project, launched in 2009 and completed in 2012. The thirty-one-mile stretch of road connects the capital Nairobi to the city of Thika and was jointly financed by China's Exim Bank and the African Development Bank. The China Roads and Bridges Corporation, China's largest state-owned construction company for roads, bridges and ports, won the bid for the Thika Highway project along with two other major road contracts in the country. At the outset, owners of Kenyan-owned construction firms had expressed anger over the growing number of projects going to Chinese-owned and other foreign companies. The conflict with local companies had been such a problem for the Kenyan government that the Ministry of Roads convened a conference to discuss ways in which local firms could win more road construction tenders. At this meeting, the former Prime Minister Raila Odinga told local companies, 'You have to be competitive vis-à-vis the Chinese in terms of costs, quality and speed.'¹ Local contractors disagreed, arguing that there had been underinvestment in the sector and that Chinese-owned companies consistently submitted lower bids, mainly due to lower labour and material costs. This led to political conflicts between the Kenyan-owned construction companies, unions and the Kenyan government. In an interview with a Kenyan architect who had been subcontracted by a Chinese-owned construction firm on a different project, she confirmed that 'we have very very competent [Kenyan] contractors but they're few and far in between and the demand is very high for them'.² In her estimation, Kenyan-owned firms had the human capacity and technical skills needed to carry out road and building construction, but they lacked the financing to do the work and to practise managing medium- and large-scale infrastructure delivery. She stated that decisions were made to protect the 'bottom line' and, in her experience, since the Chinese-owned firms were professional and had produced good-quality work at a lower cost, there was no incentive for the government to pay more money to support local construction companies. In her view:

The money made by a Chinese person goes back into their community, and it never makes its way out. Basically, it's rotated within the community, so they have that tendency. I wish Kenya would practise it because we could have a very strong economy. Most of the time we prefer to import everything like equipment, materials and workers.³

The architect's observations capture the connection between capacity building, infrastructure delivery and – implicitly – Kenya's vision for industrialization.

The Nairobi–Thika Highway project raised China's profile in Kenya, and, along with it, concerns of how the Kenyan government could sustain such infrastructure over time, since local construction firms were effectively shut out of the

¹'China firms outmuscling Kenyan ones on road projects', Reuters, 2 November 2011 <<https://www.reuters.com/article/ozatp-kenya-roads-20101102-idAFJ0E6A10L520101102>>, accessed 13 January 2012.

²Interview with architect, Nairobi, 10 July 2010.

³*Ibid.*

process. Kenyan bloggers and journalists closely followed the project with anticipation that this and similar road construction and repair would help Kenya secure its status as the gateway to East Africa. Bloggers, such as engineering student Wilfred Gachugi, had a nuanced view of China's work on the Thika Highway project. He praised Chinese work on the project and placed blame on government bodies such as the Engineers Registration Board of Kenya. On 19 September 2011, Wilfred Gachugi published a blog post titled 'What happens when the Chinese leave?' He argued that, despite the excitement around the completion of the project, the Kenyan government should have provided more opportunities to employ young Kenyan engineers to work on it. Gachugi cited statistics published in a local newspaper article that compared the number of engineering degrees awarded in Kenya versus China. He wrote that 'China makes 600,000 Engineers [*sic*] in 100 disciplines per year while we produce 600 in 10 disciplines' (Gachugi 2011). He concluded that the government impeded development by awarding contracts solely to Chinese-owned firms that employed experts from China and not Kenya. Gachugi challenged the government to consider alternative possibilities such as the 'Kamau Cheng Wa Construction Company' or the 'Otieno Li Engineering Company' (*ibid.*). The fictional names of joint-owned Kenyan and Chinese firms demonstrate Gachugi's aspiration for businesses to engage in reciprocal endeavours. Gachugi wrote:

If this standoff continues the Chinese will take all the contracts in the country while our engineers just sit back and watch. It will be a pity if indeed we achieve the Vision 2030, which will be in fact, a Vision MADE IN CHINA. (Gachugi 2011)

Contributors to blogs, Twitter posts and online discussion forums provided rich commentary on the Thika Highway project, ranging from the quality of construction to its planning and design. In this case, the policies of the Kenyan government were criticized for not supporting human capacity building in the engineering sector and for not providing opportunities for skills transfer between foreign companies and domestic ones in Kenya's quest for infrastructural development. Gachugi used his blog as an online forum not only as a counter-channel to critique his government's actions, but also to make a call for political and economic remediation. Concerns about the lack of opportunities, especially for young Kenyans, in building the country's infrastructure were coming on the heels of rumours that Chinese companies operating in Kenya were using Chinese prisoners as cheap labourers. African-based blogs and discussion threads frequently contain posts with critiques of labour relations, including the idea that the broadly defined 'Chinese' are 'importing Chinese prison labourers' to Africa. In addressing perceptions of diverse actors from China who are residing, trading, selling, constructing and manufacturing in Africa, the problem of China's public image and the circulation of rumours are linked to China's challenge to earn a positive reputation in Africa.

With regards to rumour, no event or incident is a matter of fact and local interpretations of evidence and truth matter in societies where people lack the power to influence the political and economic worlds in which they live. Tamotsu Shibutani defines rumour as a 'form of communication through which individuals caught together in an ambiguous situation attempt to construct a meaningful interpretation of it by pooling their intellectual resources' (1966: 17). This form of

collective problem solving is a dynamic, spatially and temporally defined response by communities trying to understand their changing environments. In her book, *Speaking with Vampires*, Luise White states that designating rumours from and about Africa as unsubstantiated fears reduces them to 'African misunderstandings of colonial interventions; it would be to argue that these stories simply deformed actual events and procedures' (2000: 5). White's central argument is that people interpret events based on what they know, and that instead of discarding these accounts, scholars should view them as a tool to reveal a complex world of anxiety and ambiguity. Because these accounts are hard to prove, they are often deemed false and ignored by researchers. White writes: 'The inaccuracies in these stories make them exceptionally reliable historical sources; they offer historians a way to see the world the way the storytellers did, as a world of vulnerability and unreasonable relationships' (*ibid.*: 5). It is, however, the 'very falseness' of the stories that makes them rich in meaning, because each time the story is told the content is revised to fit the uncertain world people experience (*ibid.*: 43). 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. The rumour of Chinese prison labour in Africa may be interpreted by what Hilary Patroba (2012) describes as unconventional labour practices by Chinese firms. Local Africans had been observing these 'unconventional' labour practices for some time. Cheryl Schmitz (2014), in her study on security, perceived criminality and suspicion between Angolans and Chinese in Luanda, argues that rumours are a symptom of significant tensions between different groups. She concludes that the prison labour rumour has legitimate social and political effects, thus its verifiability becomes irrelevant (*ibid.*: 51).

In a statement made at the grand opening of the Thika Highway project in November 2012, Chinese Ambassador Liu Quangyuan responded to rumours of Chinese prisoners building the highway. He stated that 'rumours that these kind-hearted and hard-working people just like you and me have been defamed as prisoners makes me heart-broken' (Sangira 2012). Ambassador Liu went on to say that the Chinese workers 'deserve our respect and gratitude' because throughout the duration of the project they did not go to bars at night nor did they enjoy holiday breaks in Mombasa (*ibid.*). The stories of prisoners from China were not published by the Kenyan press but instead were the subject of personal conversations. His response signalled that the criticisms of China's labour practices had been circulating and warranted a public response by a high-level official. In interviews with Kenyans who had worked directly with Chinese individuals or firms, participants provided some context for the rumour referenced by Ambassador Liu. In an interview with the Kenyan chairperson of a multinational company that worked closely with Chinese firms, he stated that he had visited a grain-processing plant where 'Chinese prisoners' were working in Kenya.⁴ He said that the alleged prisoners were all serving time for white-collar crimes and had specific skills needed by the factory managers. When asked where he had obtained this information he stated that he had observed prison labour while touring the facility. The chairperson's account was the only one in which a

⁴Interview with chairperson, Nairobi, 13 July 2010.

participant reported witnessing Chinese 'prison' labourers. In other interviews, informants had heard accounts of Chinese prisoners working in Kenya from other individuals. When asked who had told him that the Chinese workers were prisoners, he firmly responded that he knew that they were prisoners. The Kenyan government requires foreign companies to report the number of foreign nationals working for them. At least two Chinese-owned grain-processing plants were operating in Kenya between 2000 and 2006. According to the Kenya Investment Authority, the Chinese Huangpai Grain Processing Company processed maize, wheat and rice oil and employed six foreigners and twenty-two local employees (Onjala 2008). The other company was Proparco East Africa Limited; this was also Chinese-owned, it was engaged in grain handling, and had ten foreign employees and fifty-seven local employees (*ibid.*). When asked why respondents thought that Chinese prisoners were working in Africa, the consensus was that the long work hours and separate living quarters for Chinese workers had not been observed for other foreigners in the country.

One informant referred to the practice of using prisoners as 'not normal' and 'not right', and it allowed 'China to maximize profits'.⁵ The striking difference between the practices that Kenyans called prison labour and Mr Liu's interpretation of those observations as mere rumour may be a matter of perception. The political authority had the power to disseminate the message broadly that the rumour about Chinese prison labour was untrue, and furthermore the ambassador considered this false information offensive. He evoked race in his statement and implied that the prison labour stories were xenophobic. Nevertheless, what informants observed as 'not right' labour practices, Mr Liu interpreted as the behaviour of 'hard-working' people. The statement that the workers did not engage in leisure activities outside their enclaves can be interpreted in many ways. It was clear that Mr Liu viewed the isolation of Chinese workers as a positive sign of the commitment the construction firm had to completing its job without disruptive local entertainment venues. However, isolation from the local community gave rise to speculation that the reason why the workers did not engage in public spaces was that they were forbidden from doing so. In other words, the assumption was that the workers did not have the freedom to leave the confines of their workspace and company-owned temporary dwellings. For example, in an interview, an information technology professional said: 'The Chinese bring their workers here, and they don't transfer their technology and skills to us Kenyans. They are very clever. They bring cheap labour here, even prisoners to work.' When asked where he got the information about the prisoners, he said that he had heard it from someone else. When asked why he believed this story, he responded with: 'Why else would they be here working under these terrible conditions?'⁶ The sentiment of the IT professional, who had travelled to China on business and contracted with Chinese-owned companies, was repeated by other Kenyan informants working close to Chinese individuals and firms.

In addition to the rumour about Chinese prisoners, the subject of Chinese labour camps was brought up by one informant who stated that his business partner had worked with a Chinese company for five years and 'had first-hand

⁵Interview with real-estate agent, Nairobi, 22 July 2010.

⁶Interview with IT professional, Nairobi, 4 July 2010.

experience with camps'.⁷ In December 2010, a series of newspaper articles and blog posts was published in response to a US diplomatic cable released by WikiLeaks that claimed that Chinese labour camps in Kenya were linked to ivory smuggling (Kariuki 2010).⁸ In many cases, temporary settlements are established to house employees working on transport infrastructure projects. These settlements are often isolated from the communities in which they are located, sometimes importing their food and supplies. Ching Kwan Lee (2009) argues that these 'enclaves' act as distinct sub-territorial units within a foreign country. Enclaves exist differently according to the social and cultural units contained within these spaces. Some enclaves are more integrated into local communities than others (*ibid.*), and, in some cases, Chinese workers have decided to stay in the host country after the infrastructure project is completed.

The digital grapevine has also provided a counter-channel, where dubious claims are made that reinforce xenophobic attitudes towards migrants – not only those from Asia but also those from other African nations. On 5 March 2011, Kenya Citizen Television ran a news story about a twenty-year-old woman who claimed to have had a child by a Chinese national working on the Thika Highway project. The television broadcast, which was also posted on the network's YouTube channel, contained footage of the young woman with her child walking along Thika Highway asking Kenyan and Chinese construction workers to help her locate the Chinese father of her two-month-old child.⁹ On 7 March 2011, Sanity, a discussion board contributor on the popular Kenyan news aggregate and discussion site Wazua, commented on the television story:

The baby is a beauty. The girl should concentrate on bringing up the baby. Chances are that even if she gets the father, he is a miserable chinese [*sic*] prisoner hauled to Kenya to provide cheap labour. There is no way he will be [able to] provide for the child. Most of these chinese [*sic*] guys are serving prison terms.¹⁰

Achille Mbembe argues that the 'new common sense' produced in postcolonial relations creates a 'world of meanings' that orders multiple scales of interactions between institutions, knowledge systems and norms, and that ordinary African people both resist and seek refuge from hegemonic institutions through the use of obscene and grotesque parodies that seek to ridicule exploitative regimes (2001: 80–1). This framework may be applied to explain why people deploy the prison labour rumour: it provides an alternative narrative that critiques official discourses on the value of Chinese-led infrastructure development in Africa. Many comments, such as Sanity's, which stated that they heard the prison labour rumour through the 'grapevine', readily referenced Chinese prison labour working on infrastructure projects across Africa. There were hundreds of comments by different contributors across Kenyan sites that mentioned Chinese

⁷Interview with a professional in the hospitality and tourism sector, Nairobi, 22 July 2010.

⁸See also 'Kenya and WikiLeaks: part two', Kenyanentrepreneur.com blog, 9 December 2010 <<http://www.kenyanentrepreneur.com/kenya-wikileaks>>, accessed 18 November 2011.

⁹'20 yr old girl looking for her Chinese baby daddy', Kenya Citizen Television/YouTube, 5 March 2011 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bztNoEypJG0>>, accessed 3 December 2011.

¹⁰See 'No wonder Thika Road is taking so long to be completed', Wazua, 7 March 2011 <<http://www.wazua.co.ke/forum.aspx?g=posts&t=11347>>, accessed 3 December 2011.

prison labour working on construction projects. African-based blogs provide a platform for oral accounts to be transferred to digital spaces, thus continuing the world of the rumour. In a study on the use of social media to propagate rumours during the 2007 Kenyan general election, Hezron Ndunde concluded that cyberspace is a critical public sphere that has the power to enable citizens to critique power and unjust political processes while also having the 'deleterious effect' of feeding and amplifying rumours (Ndunde 2008). Users like Sanity are commenting on the 'misery' of low-wage Chinese labourers while also perpetuating stereotypes of Chinese people. The problem with the transition to digital spaces is that the prison labour rumour is rightly interpreted as dangerous, especially within the context of the 'Yellow Peril'.

The conversations both in person and online on the Thika Highway project illustrate the complexity of people's views on the process of infrastructure delivery and its connection to who carries out the work and under what conditions they do so. Under these circumstances, there had been a general lack of transparency and the prison labour stories were a result of Kenyan communities grappling with ambiguous arrangements between their government and institutions from China. A reasonable interpretation of the rumour is that the living and labour conditions for some workers from China are so poor that only prisoners would be subjected to such treatment. In the absence of information from formal institutions on Chinese labour practices in Africa, this has prompted individuals and communities to construct their own meanings of what they have experienced or observed. The fact that these rumours exist is an indication that communities have yet to receive a satisfactory explanation about what exactly is happening and in whose interests their leaders are serving. The lack of transparency, accountability and citizen participation within African governments and the Chinese government is one reason why these stories persist. In the absence of high-quality communication by institutions, communities will define difficult or ambiguous situations for themselves. In the process of understanding contemporary waves of Chinese labour migrants to Africa, the story of the convict labourer has reached a consensus. Labelling workers as 'prisoners' is different from labelling them as 'forced' or 'indentured' workers. The convict or prisoner label implies criminality and thus demonization of Chinese workers as being unfit for integration into society. Even though the 'Chinese prison labourer' acts as a proxy for a critique of Sino-African power relations, there is both xenophobia and prejudice that comes with the characterization of Chinese workers as convicts that cannot be overlooked.

The Standard Gauge Railway

Shifting away from the Nairobi–Thika Highway project and the function of rumour as a counter-channel that people individually and collectively use to perceive and interpret foreign actors in the infrastructure sector, the Mombasa–Nairobi Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) is another case where the absence of transparency in the sector has prompted individuals to engage counter-channels in critiquing Kenyan government policies and the behaviour of Chinese firms. Unlike the Thika Highway project, where individuals used the Chinese prison

labour rumour as a proxy for a conversation about labour in the infrastructure sector, the SGR illuminates problems with youth unemployment, immigration and racism. Chinese firms have been widely lauded for delivering turnkey projects that have undoubtedly improved many African nations' failing – or in some cases non-existent – infrastructure. In both formal interviews and informal discussions with students, taxi drivers and market sellers, there was a sense of excitement and pride that there were transport construction projects under way. The familiar phrase was that 'the Chinese were coming up' in Kenya. Along with that assessment was a cautious warning by respondents that unless the Kenyan government acted in the interest of ordinary citizens, 'China would take advantage' of them.

The youth unemployment crisis had been on the government's agenda since 2009, when the Ministry of Youth and Sports published the Youth Employment Marshall Plan. Since then, there has been a steady increase in unemployment rates despite efforts by the government to boost the number of jobs for young people. In response to the pressing issue of youth employment, in 2012 the Kenyan government stopped issuing employment permits to foreign workers earning less than US\$1,900 per month or US\$24,000 per year (Republic of Kenya 2012) to boost jobs for Kenyans and prevent expatriates from holding entry-level jobs. That year, 80 per cent of Kenya's 2.3 million unemployed were young people between fifteen and thirty-four years of age (UNDP 2013). The immigration legislation was targeted at the transport construction sector, where there was a fear that Chinese companies would use workers from China instead of Kenyans. The legislation also barred foreigners below the age of thirty-five from being issued work permits – a measure targeting youth unemployment. In reporting on the legislation, a 10 July 2012 article titled 'Kenya locks out young and low-paid foreign workers' in *Business Daily* (Nairobi) stated:

It remains to be seen how the government will handle the thousands of skilled and semi-skilled foreign workers employed in key infrastructure projects such as road and housing construction. If strictly applied, the regulations could particularly affect hundreds of Chinese working on Kenyan roads and who are known to earn much less than the threshold of Sh2 million per year.¹¹

Even though the author singled out Chinese workers in the transport construction sector, the article cited that the highest number of permits were issued to foreign nationals from India at 10,581, followed by China at 3,494, Britain at 2,700 and the US at 1,593.¹² The online discussion that followed this article revealed that the perception that foreign migrants working in low- or semi-skilled labour were subjected to low wages and poor living conditions was not just a Chinese phenomenon. One article commenter, named 'Rofi', focused on workers from India and Pakistan who work in factories, commenting on how they 'live locked up in boarding houses'.¹³ In a matter of days, the article had amassed

¹¹See <<http://www.businessdailyafrica.com/corporate/Kenya-locks-out-young-and-low-paid-foreign-workers-/539550-1450584-wtcv3oz/index.html>>, accessed 17 November 2017.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³See <<http://www.businessdailyafrica.com/Corporate-News/Kenya-locks-out-young-and-low-paid-foreign-workers-/539550/1450584/-/item/1/-/sr64vr/-/index.html>>, accessed 23 February 2013.

208 comments with posts in support of the measure, arguing that it did not go far enough to limit the number of Asian immigrants entering Kenya, although others argued that the prohibition of young foreign nationals might stifle innovation and development. Most of the comments were blatantly intolerant of foreign workers, some targeted highly paid expatriates, and others specifically targeted low-wage South and East Asian workers. Another posted comment from 'Denis' focused on the issues of corruption and immigration, among other things:

Have you listened to MJ's 'Smooth Criminal'? Or Kenyan artist, Mashifta='System ya Majambazi!' This is what our politicians are = Majambazi! They commit grave white collar crimes. Unless they check the flooding of illegal immigrants, we will soon have riots on our streets (blue collar crimes) just as it happened in Tel Aviv when Jews rioted that African refugees be deported from Israel. Another MJ song: They Don't Care About Us.¹⁴

The song 'System ya *Majambazi*' – or 'System of Babylon' – by Kenyan hip-hop group Mashifta is a critique of capitalism in general and corruption within the government (Njogu and Maupeu 2007: 119). *Majambazi* means bandits, and listeners are posed with the question: who are the real thugs? Is it the politicians or poor people in the streets? In Denis's post, the thugs are the politicians. The reference to Michael Jackson's 'Smooth Criminal' echoes the idea that the political and economic systems protect the white-collar elite and that the blue-collar masses of native 'legal' Kenyans may resort to riots in order to protect their place as workers. In the discussion posts that follow, participants speculate that the law will not be enforced, and they list the ways in which businesses can circumvent it. In the discussion, comparisons were also made to US visa policies, which are also quite restrictive towards unskilled migrants and are instead aimed at attracting highly skilled and highly educated foreign-born talent. Online discussions such as these offer some insight into perspectives on Sino-African engagements and the complex labour relations between African and Asian communities in general.

Taking into account public perceptions of youth unemployment in large-scale infrastructure projects, in September 2014 the Kenyan government announced that the China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC) would undertake the construction of the most massive infrastructure project since independence, the SGR, and employ 30,000 Kenyans to do so. The CRBC won the contract, and China's Export-Import Bank financed 85 per cent of the project with concessional and commercial loans totalling US\$3.23 billion.¹⁵ Unlike the case of the Thika Highway project, there was an intentional effort on the part of the Kenyan government to advocate for skills transfer and the hiring of locals. In the case of the SGR, in 2015 the story circulated online that President Uhuru Kenyatta personally carried out the negotiations with the CRBC on their hiring quotas. Despite this

¹⁴See <<http://www.businessdailyafrica.com/Corporate-News/Kenya-locks-out-young-and-low-paid-foreign-workers-/539550/1450584/-/item/1/-/sr64vr/-/index.html>>, accessed 23 February 2013.

¹⁵See 'China EXIM Bank loans USD 1.633b for Nairobi-Mombasa railway section', China AidData <<http://china.aiddata.org/projects/37103>>, accessed 17 November 2017.

effort, there were many protests in different regions along the train's route because of Kenyan workers' poor wages and substandard living conditions compared with their Chinese counterparts (Mwakio 2015). In one case, the labour practices communicated in the counter-channel, or the rumour of prison labour, reappeared when Kenyan employees of CRBC in a factory producing railway carriages cited health and safety hazards such as a lack of sanitation facilities, exposure to hydrocarbon emissions and the lack of furniture in the metal shacks that served as company housing (Kariuki 2015). In multiple cases, there were protests over lack of access to employment opportunities provided by CRBC (Mkanyika 2017; Sayagie 2016).¹⁶ It was clear that CRBC would not address the ongoing youth unemployment crisis on its own. In each of the protests mentioned above, demonstrators stated that it was the responsibility of local leaders to ensure transparency in hiring and not use the demand for workers to advance narrow political interests. This appeal was made in response to claims that local officials were asking for bribes from applicants who wanted employment with CRBC. Despite these problems, the completion of the Mombasa–Nairobi SGR in June 2017 was a significant win for the government's Vision 2030 programme. With the goal of connecting landlocked South Sudan, eastern DRC, Rwanda, Burundi and Ethiopia to Indian Ocean trade routes by way of Mombasa, the project signalled a milestone in Kenya's quest to attract foreign investment by serving as a major transport corridor for East and Central Africa. On the subject of youth unemployment, Julius Muia, director general of Kenya's Vision 2030, reassured constituencies at the launch of the SGR:

A mega windfall of even better opportunities now beckons the large pool of unemployed youth with a promise to transform their socio-economic status and shield the country from potential risk of rise in violence and crime levels on account of poverty. Government's commitment to ensure effective and efficient transport systems are being put in place. More opportunities through mega projects like SGR in line with Vision 2030 blueprint, should offer more hope to reduce joblessness. Currently, the new railway line has opened up fresh business opportunities and new markets for products. (Muia 2017)

Both the Kenyan and Chinese governments, along with CRBC, engaged in a robust public relations campaign to assure the public that Kenyans were hired to carry out most of the construction of the SGR and that about 400 engineers and technicians would be trained to maintain the rail system after its launch. However, in July 2018 a story broke in the Kenyan press that 4,954 Chinese nationals had been granted visas to work on the railway as managers, train operators, surveyors, welders, secretaries, engineers, accountants and cooks since its launch a year earlier (Wafula 2018). In addition to the issue of employment, the article stated that Kenyan workers were subject to racism in job placement, low wages, arbitrary dismissals and poor working conditions. Government officials and representatives from CRBC refuted the number of Chinese employees on

¹⁶See also 'Kenyans protesting over jobs block highway from Mombasa port', Reuters, 3 October 2014 <<https://www.reuters.com/article/kenya-protests-road/kenyans-protesting-over-jobs-block-highway-from-mombasa-port-idUSL6N0RY1NQ20141003>>, accessed 17 November 2017.

the SGR in public announcements that were published in Kenya's three top-circulated papers. Of note is the social media response to the story that culminated in a hashtag on Kenya Twitter – #IStandWithWafula – that trended for two days in mid-July 2018. Users on Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter posted comments in defence of a free press and in support of Paul Wafula, the journalist who led the investigation. In the first of a series of articles on employment practices on the SGR, Wafula wrote:

But beneath this shiny veneer is a tale of pain, anguish and broken dreams for a multitude of Kenyans who feel trapped on the train that ably fits the moniker Orient Express, because on it, Chinese nationals have created a small kingdom in which they run roughshod over Kenyan workers who say they are experiencing neo-colonialism, racism and blatant discrimination as the taxpayer foots the Sh30 million a day bill for the train, which loosely translates to Sh1 billion at the end of every month. (Wafula 2018)

Albeit in dramatic fashion, Wafula's statement taps into a sentiment that has been expressed in online forums since the SGR project was launched. At the heart of Wafula's critique is the question of who is building and maintaining Kenya's infrastructure. Moreover, whom does it serve? On the assertion that Kenyan SGR employees have experienced neocolonialism, racism and discrimination, Wafula underscores three critical issues. The first reflects excitement over the prospects of Kenya rising as a major economic hub in East Africa tempered by the certainty that Kenyans themselves may not be the agents or drivers of their infrastructure. It implicitly articulates the aspirations of Kenyans to move towards a prosperous future on their own terms. Online spaces allowed for counter-channels of dissent to emerge as commenters attempted to reorient the discourse from blaming Chinese actors to focusing on the role of the Kenyan government in facilitating mutually beneficial arrangements with China. In response to a quote from Wafula's article, @ASimbiS-KE posted the following tweet on 17 July 2018: '#IStandWithWafula we blame the government for all these [issues]. They have given too much leeway to the foreigners and don't care about it's [*sic*] citizens.'¹⁷ Facebook user Jaffe Ogilla wrote: 'By trying to muzzle or gag the journalist who uncovered the SGR rot, the cartels and the GOK [Government of Kenya] running the project are resigned to fleecing tax payers and creating jobs for Chinese. Neocolonialism must not be allowed to thrive under the garb of "development." #IStandwithWafula (2018).'¹⁸ These two interpretations evoke the spirit of the song '*System ya Majambazi*' by critiquing the government's handling of visas for foreign workers and its failure to ensure that publicly funded services are employing qualified locals. The Kenyan government reached an agreement with CRBC to operate and maintain the SGR for ten years.¹⁹ Government officials

¹⁷See <https://twitter.com/ASimbiS_KE/status/1019203908927881216/photo/1>, accessed 10 September 2018.

¹⁸Facebook, 17 July 2018 <<https://www.facebook.com/plugins/post.php?href=https://%3A%2F%2Fwww.facebook.com/%2Fjogilla/%2Fposts/%2F10211678310090122&width=500>>, accessed 10 September 2018.

¹⁹See 'Kenya Railways, Chinese firm sign operations agreement', Xinhua, 31 May 2017 <http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-05/31/c_136326487.htm>, accessed 10 September 2018.

did not communicate this arrangement to the Kenyan public at the launch of the SGR.

Second, Wafula's statement arouses deep fears that labour practices follow a pattern in which outside actors have exploited African workers. Looking at this case through a historical lens, Kenya's first transport infrastructure, built during the colonial era, was carried out using both compulsory and voluntary labour. In 1920, Kenyan colonial administrators established a legal framework that required Kenyan and Indian labourers to work twenty-four days a year, unpaid, on 'communal labour' projects (Berman and Lonsdale 1980). Connecting contemporary labour practices to historical ones in railway, road and public works projects evokes colonial legacies that were inherently extractive. When Kenyans say that they are experiencing neocolonialism, it is the colonial legacy that they are comparing to present-day ties to China.

Finally, claims of racism by Chinese individuals in Africa are not new. A comparison of the race and labour relations of Chinese firms in Africa to those of other developing nations' European and US partners provides one perspective on the points of convergence and divergence in labour practices. A study by Zander Rounds and Hongxiang Huang compared employment relations of small-scale Chinese and American firms in Kenya. They found that Chinese managers used stereotypical terms that demonized Kenyan workers, such as 'lazy' and 'inefficient'; similarly, white Americans expressed challenges with 'punctuality', but they did not explicitly link those perceptions of Kenyans to race. The study also found that the stereotypical attitudes of Chinese managers towards Kenyan workers 'led them, at times, to consciously or unconsciously treat local employees unequally' (Rounds and Huang 2017). In response to reports of racism by SGR managers that were published online and in local media outlets, Kenya's Labour Secretary launched an investigation that affirmed discrimination, coercion and segregation of Kenyan workers by Chinese managers (Oruko 2018).

Conclusion

The Thika Highway project and the SGR are cases where individual and collective accounts of Sino-African labour relations and the Kenyan government's response have prompted a robust discussion on the role of foreign actors in Kenya's infrastructure development. Taken together, these accounts create a collective narrative that serves as an entry point to understanding how Kenyans with a sustained interest in Sino-African relations have interpreted Chinese economic intervention on a local level. Infrastructural development and labour policy are critical issues as the Kenyan government continues to embark on large-scale road and rail projects in its vision to become a newly industrializing middle-income country. Even though Kenyans were generally optimistic about the potential for China's role in building infrastructure, they were sophisticated in their understandings of how precarious their position is because of the asymmetrical power relations and the lack of transparency in the arrangements between the Kenyan government and construction firms such as CRBC.

In the case of the Thika Highway project, the subject of stories – or, as some would say, rumours – was not the Chinese labourer or 'prisoner'; this was

merely a proxy for a broader conversation about the current condition of Africa and its historical and contemporary relationships with foreign actors. The source of the rumour is not as significant as its function as a particular articulation of knowledge. Rumour was a strategy used to critique the Kenyan government's engagement with foreign actors and the failure of African elites to mediate more equitable arrangements with China. The case of the SGR revealed accusations of racism, discrimination, unfair wages and poor working conditions for Kenyan employees that were levelled against CRBC and the Kenyan government. It demonstrated that online channels provide a rich data source from which people's fears and aspirations may be evaluated. Oral narratives and street-level conversations offer alternative spaces for dissenting discourses for people in political systems that ignore, dismiss or restrict citizen participation. These counter-channels reveal that infrastructural development is a political process that should be participatory and transparent.

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Abstract

The Kenyan government's long-term development strategy, Vision 2030, has emphasized infrastructural investments, which it believes will lead to sustained economic growth. The government has appealed to China to fund large-scale projects in the transport sector, and as a consequence of this, construction firms from

China have emerged as significant employers in the country. While the Kenyan government contends with the ongoing burden of youth unemployment, it must also reconcile the ambiguities of China's role in Africa and its implications for the labour market. This article examines two Chinese-built infrastructure projects in Kenya and their intersection with several issues involving migrant labour and local rumours of Chinese prisoners, as well as the state's vision for industrialization and youth employment. Kenyans utilize both online and interpersonal channels of discourse to critique present-day employment practices in the transport sector, and it is argued that these counter-channels of discourse represent a particular articulation of knowledge used by Kenyans to construct meaning and interpret ambiguous situations. Through a theoretical analysis of rumour, this article illustrates how ordinary Kenyans are pooling their intellectual resources to understand Sino-Kenyan labour relations in the absence of transparency and participatory government processes in the infrastructure sector.

Résumé

La stratégie de développement à long terme du gouvernement kenyan, Vision 2030, privilégie l'investissement d'infrastructure, le considérant comme un moteur de croissance économique durable. Le gouvernement a demandé à la Chine de financer des grands projets dans le secteur des transports, avec pour conséquence l'émergence d'entreprises de construction chinoises parmi les principaux employeurs dans le pays. À l'heure où le gouvernement kenyan est confronté à un taux élevé de chômage des jeunes, il doit aussi concilier les ambiguïtés du rôle de la Chine en Afrique et ses implications pour le marché du travail. Cet article examine deux projets d'infrastructure construits par les Chinois au Kenya et leur intersection avec plusieurs affaires impliquant des travailleurs migrants et des rumeurs locales de prisonniers chinois, ainsi que la vision de l'État en matière d'industrialisation et d'emploi des jeunes. Les Kenyans utilisent des canaux de discours en ligne et interpersonnels pour critiquer les pratiques actuelles en matière d'emploi dans le secteur des transports, et l'article soutient que ces contre-canaux de discours représentent une articulation particulière de la connaissance utilisée par les Kenyans pour construire du sens et interpréter des situations ambiguës. À travers une analyse théorique de la rumeur, cet article illustre comment les Kenyans ordinaires mettent en commun leurs ressources intellectuelles pour comprendre les relations du travail sino-kenyanes en l'absence de transparence et de processus gouvernementaux participatifs dans le secteur infrastructurel.